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SPINETINGLERS

#26

WEAR AND SCARE

M. T. COFFIN

AN AVON CAMELOT BOOK

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Sam Basket kept glancing at the classroom clock. The instant the final bell rang, he was on his feet. Out in the hall, he barely saw the crowds of kids flowing around him or the construction-paper pumpkins and black-cat decorations hanging from the ceilings.

Sam stopped at his locker long enough to get his jacket. He didn't look up when Josh Gibbons said hello and he didn't really notice when Melissa Tule smiled at him. Sam wasn't trying to be rude. His brain was buzzing with ideas for this year's fifth-grade haunted house. He was so excited that he felt like jumping up and down and shouting like a little kid at a birthday party.

Every year, Neal Elementary held a Halloween carnival, and the haunted house was an important part of it. Sam was president of the Haunted-House Committee this year. This was a big responsibility. Neal Elementary had a tradition of great haunted houses at the Halloween

Carnival. Sam wanted this year's to be the best one yet. He wanted the whole town to be talking about it all the way till Christmas.

"Hey, Sam. Wait up!"

This voice was loud enough to pierce Sam's thoughts. It was more than loud, actually—it was a shout. He looked up, smiling. He already knew who it was. Beth Olsen. She was coming toward him, walking as fast as she could. Her long brown braids bounced off her back as she strode along.

Sam glanced at the doorway to Room 13. Mrs. Gostan was scowling at Beth, just waiting for her to break into a run so she could snap her fingers like a machine gun and order Beth to slow down in the hall. Mrs. Gostan lived for this kind of thing. She was always on the lookout for anything fun that was about to happen. She preferred to squash it before it had a chance to spread.

Sam wished for the tenth time that they could get Mrs. Gostan to be a witch for the haunted house. She wouldn't need much of a costume. She was tall and thin and her fingers were pale and long—with her scowling face, she'd be perfect. Sam smiled. Actually, he could think of two people who would make even better witches—his mother and his Aunt Emma. They both loved Halloween.

"I have a great idea," Beth said breathlessly, once she was closer to Sam. Her voice was still pretty loud, even now that she was standing right beside him. Beth was just that kind of per-

son. She was on the Haunted-House Committee, too, and Sam was glad. Beth was fun.

"You'll like this," Beth began, still out of breath from hurrying to catch up with him. "You will like this a lot." They slowed their pace, but kept walking toward the big double doors that led outside. "It's the best idea in the world," Beth added, ducking her head modestly. Sam nodded, waiting for her to go on. Beth usually had good ideas. She flipped her long braids back over her shoulder and wrinkled her nose. Sam had known her since second grade—when Beth's nose wrinkled it meant that she was about to say something that she had thought about a lot.

"Sam? Do you think we could get a real house?"

Sam shook his head, puzzled. "A real house?"

Beth smiled. "I mean, borrow someone's house. So we could have different rooms, real rooms, to put things in, not just fake partitions in the gym like usual."

Sam thought about it. He started to shake his head, but it *was* a cool idea. It was incredible, in fact. He imagined it for a second. It would be really fun to be able to lead people from one room into the next. Each room could have different things in it. One whole room could be full of threads taped to the ceiling so it would be like walking through a forest of spider webs. The kitchen could have bowls of eyeballs and frog soup simmering on one burner and chopped-up rat or something lying on the counter on a cutting board. It was almost too great to even think

about. Sam sighed. But who would want all that tape on their ceiling? Who would let a whole school of kids tramp through their kitchen and living room?

"Nobody would ever let us do that," Sam said aloud. He watched Beth's face squinch up the way it did when she knew something was true but didn't want to admit it. They walked in silence all the way past the cafeteria and through the big double doors that led outside.

"You're probably right," Beth finally said as they made their way down the wide steps and onto the playground. All around them, kids walked in groups, laughing and talking. "I know my mother wouldn't, anyway," she added, shrugging. "It would just be so amazing. We could lay out a whole gross dinner in the dining room, make fake weird food with food coloring and shaving cream and . . . okay." She stopped, frowning. "You're right, no one would let us."

Sam nodded sadly, agreeing with her. It would be the coolest thing ever. But there was no point in getting all excited about something they couldn't have. It was better to work hard on what they *could* do—to concentrate on that. They could still make a good haunted house. In fact, this was going to be the best haunted house ever. Sam knew he was probably a little bit too ambitious about things. But he really did like to do things well. And he *loved* haunted houses.

"I wish there was some way—" Beth began.

"My Aunt Emma is going to help us," Sam in-

terrupted, to change the subject. "She's an actor and she writes scripts and she's even done special effects for movies."

Beth looked impressed. "I've met your aunt, but I never knew that. Wow! She does special effects?"

Sam nodded. Emma was his favorite aunt. "She says she has a recipe for fake blood that would fool anybody into running for a bandage." Beth laughed and Sam grinned. "She's going to let us have the meetings at her house if we want—so that we don't have to stop at three-thirty when the janitor locks up. She only lives about three blocks from here."

Sam watched a thoughtful expression come over Beth's face and he could almost hear what she was thinking before she said it. "Do you think she'd let us use her place for the haunted house, too?"

Sam looked across the playground, blinking in the bright sunlight. It was still warm—Indian summer was really lasting a long time this year. Sam realized he was holding his breath while Beth waited for his answer. He let it out. If anyone would let them use a whole house Halloween night, it would be Aunt Emma. "I could ask her," he said out loud.

Beth grinned. "Do you think she'd let us?"

Sam shrugged. "Probably not. But she's the only person I can think of who would ever think about saying yes. It'd be the coolest haunted

house ever if she would," he finished, and sighed again.

"Maybe she will," Beth said. "I wish she would." She closed her eyes and crossed her fingers, making it an official wish, then looked at him, smiling.

Sam shook his head. Beth had always believed in the power of wishing. "Then it's all settled," he told her and they both laughed.

"There's your mom," Beth said suddenly. There was disappointment in her voice. "I wanted to think up stuff for the haunted house while we walked."

"I asked her to pick me up today," Sam explained. "She has a day off and I thought we could go check out costumes."

"For the committee?"

Sam nodded. "I thought it would be neat if the four of us could wear really good costumes. Mom says if we can't find anything in Middleton, we'll drive to Bay City. I want really great ones, like actors wear. Professional costumes. Want to come?"

Beth shook her head. "Can't. I have to be home when my little sister gets out of preschool." She waved at Sam's mom, then looked back at Sam. "I think you're the best Haunted-House Committee chairperson ever," she said as he turned to go. "Don't forget to ask your Aunt Emma."

Sam nodded and waved goodbye, thinking about his aunt's house. It was only a few blocks from the school. She had a nice front yard and a

huge backyard. There was a wide vacant lot just across the street that he was pretty sure they could use for parking. The Bakers had used it for extra cars when their daughter had gotten married at home. Aunt Emma's house was old and big and it had high ceilings and ornate wood doors. It would be perfect. And Aunt Emma loved Halloween.

"Hi. Ready to go look at uglies and spookies?"

Sam's mother was grinning. Halloween was one of her favorite holidays, too. Like Aunt Emma, she had wanted to be an actor when she had gotten out of college. Even though she had eventually given up on her entertainment industry career and was an accountant now, she still watched just about every new movie that came out.

Sam smiled up at his mother as they fell into step across the parking lot. He loved to listen to her and Aunt Emma criticize and analyze everything about a movie—from the acting to the camera angles. Every time the local theater group put together a production, the two of them were in it.

"Was the first committee meeting a good one?"

Sam nodded. "We met at lunch hour and it was great. It's me, Beth, Adelia Simms and Jason Parker. It's going to be fun. They elected me chairperson."

Sam's mother rolled her eyes and pretended to curtsey as she unlocked the car door. "I'm so impressed, Samuel Basket. And to think I was

the one who was privileged enough to have made all those breakfasts, cleaned up all those scattered toys. Changed all those diapers."

Sam waved both hands in the air. "Cut it out, Mom." He glanced around. He thought his mother was really funny. But sometimes he wondered if other kids would if they could hear her when she got going. He spotted James Turner and his mother getting into a car in the next row and hoped that James hadn't overheard. Sam's cheeks felt warm and he ducked into the front seat, then turned, pretending to look out the window so his mother wouldn't notice him blushing. But of course, she did.

"Sam Basket, loosen up. No one is going to think you're weird, even if they think your mother is."

"Aw, Mom."

She ignored him, flipping on the radio as she backed out of the parking spot and headed out onto Fremont Street. She turned left, toward Main Street and the downtown shopping district. Not that it was much of a shopping district, really, but it was all that Middleton had. Sam glanced out the back window. Aunt Emma's house was the other way, a mere three-and-a-half blocks, up on Tenth Street. It would be easy for kids to walk from the school carnival once they had had enough of the costume contests, the PTA ball-tossing, and the creme-pie-throwing booths.

"Beth had an idea," Sam said slowly. His

mother nodded, without taking her eyes off the road. Sam shook his head, wondering why he even bothered to mention it. "It probably wouldn't work," he finished.

"You will never know," his mother said as she turned onto Second Street, "if you don't try. Is it something you really want to do? Don't give up before you try, if it is."

"It'd be the best haunted house ever if we could do it," Sam said wistfully.

"Tell me, then. What?"

Sam took a deep breath, and when he spoke, his words rushed out all at once. "Beth thought it'd be cool if someone would let us use their whole house. We could have stuff in the front yard, and in the living room. In the dining room we could set a whole table, but with gross food and stuff—and we could make the kitchen into a witch's kitchen and then in the back hall we could tape a million threads to the ceiling . . ." Sam trailed off, realizing that he had already planned the different rooms in his mind.

Sam heard his mother chuckle. "Let's see. Front yard stuff, dining room and kitchen stuff, a back hall—you don't have any particular house in mind, do you?"

Sam blushed again and leaned forward to change the radio station. His mother liked the worst soft classic rock. It was almost grocery-store music. He liked real rock and roll.

"Samuel Basket," his mother said. "Answer me."

"Well, I just thought that if anyone would ever let us do it, it'd be Aunt Emma."

"You could be right about that." His mother moved into the right lane, then turned up Thorne Street. Sam liked this part of town. It had been a residential area, but now it was a funky little business district, with small shops and boutiques in the old houses. Most of them had porches and big front windows with wide sidewalks and huge, old maple trees.

"I noticed a little costume shop on this block last week. I don't know if they have Halloween outfits or if it's all just theatrical costumes. We can check." She was leaning to see out Sam's window. "If we can find it, that is. Maybe it went out of business already. It looked tiny and I had never seen it or heard of it before."

"I hope it's still there," Sam said, looking up the street as far as he could.

His mother leaned over the steering wheel to read the signs as they passed. No one was behind them on the quiet street. She slowed down.

"There!" Sam announced, pointing. "Slithern's Costumes, Wear and Scare."

Sam's mother pulled to the curb in front of the shop and stopped. She undid her seat belt. "I don't know, Sam. This looks pretty small."

"We can look," Sam said, getting out of the car. His mother was looking at him over the car roof.

"You really are excited about this haunted house, aren't you?"

Sam nodded. "I want it to be the best one ever."

His mother nodded. "Well, let's take a look at what this place has to offer."

Sam followed his mother through the squeaking door into the costume shop. His nose wrinkled instantly, objecting to the heavy smell of dusty cloth.

"Well," Sam's mother whispered. "This may not be the place we need." She turned away to flip through a rack of long dresses—some of them were ruffled and fancy, others had beaded fringe. Sam saw one that looked like something an actor would wear to her premiere—low cut and shiny. He wondered for a second how many people had worn each of the costumes and if their plays, or their parties—or whatever they had been attending—had gone well. It was weird looking around the shop, like every dress, every civil-war military uniform, every nineteen-twenties gangster suit had a story to tell.

"It's a little musty in here," Sam's mother said. She dropped her voice to a whisper. "A little creepy."

Sam nodded. More than a little. He looked around, his skin prickling. Where was the salesperson? They had been standing there for a minute or two. He looked at the racks again. He could see uniforms and cowboy chaps and pirates' striped shirts and knee-high trousers—but nothing really scary. Maybe his mother had been right. This shop didn't look like it had what they needed.

"May I help you?"

The voice was so raspy, so close, that Sam jumped and he heard his mother gasp. They both turned to see a man standing beside one of the costume racks. Sam's mother recovered first. She cleared her throat and spoke politely. "We were looking for Halloween costumes."

"Scary ones," Sam added.

The man didn't answer for nearly a minute. He was old, and thin—a round-shouldered old man with hooded eyes and white hair. When he finally did speak, Sam jumped again at the sudden grating sound of his voice.

"Oh, you want nightmares? That is a specialty of mine. If you please . . ." He made a grand bow and a gesture. Sam looked where he was pointing. There was a door behind one of the clothes racks. There was no sign above it, nothing to indicate that there were more costumes in another room. Sam felt his mother hesitate and knew she was thinking similar thoughts. There was something weird about this place.

"I do not show these costumes often, so it makes no sense to display them in the main showroom," the man said.

Sam looked at him again. He had moved forward a few steps and the light near the window made his hair look lighter, nearly snow-white now. Sam noticed for the first time that he was wearing a cape. It swung and swirled as he walked.

"May I show you something specific?" he asked.

"A vampire? That's very popular just now. Or perhaps a ghoul or a ghost or a mummy or . . ."

"We'd just like to take a look at what you have, Mr. . . ."

"Slithern," the man said. "And your names?"

"I'm Jennifer Basket," Sam's mother said, in a tight formal voice that let Sam know that she didn't trust or like Mr. Slithern. If he noticed her tone, he didn't act like it.

"And this is your son?"

Sam nodded and cleared his throat. "I'm chairperson for our school Halloween Carnival haunted house. We wanted the committee members to have really good costumes and—"

"Mine are the best, I assure you," Mr. Slithern said, interrupting. "Follow me, please." He crossed the room and opened the door. It creaked like a door in a horror movie, a long, wailing sound that made Sam clench his teeth. Mr. Slithern gestured at them to follow, then disappeared through the door. His cape swooped through an instant after he did.

As Sam went through the door, he blinked. As dim as the front part of the shop had been, this room was even worse. Sam squeezed his eyes shut, then opened them, willing them to adjust. It made him feel weird not to be able to see what he was walking into. His mother was right behind him. She hesitated, too, her hand on his shoulder.

"As you can see, these are first-rate costumes." Mr. Slithern's voice was raspy but Sam could tell he was trying to be charming. "Guaranteed to cause nightmares." He chuckled softly.

Sam heard his mother make a polite sound, but if her eyes were like his, she couldn't possibly tell whether the costumes were first quality, worst quality, or somewhere in between. He looked at the darkest corner on the far side of the room, hoping his eyes would adjust and he'd be able to see.

"This one," Mr. Slithern was saying, "is one I

am particularly fond of. The cape is wonderful, don't you think?"

Sam looked away from the shadows toward the sound of Mr. Slithern's voice. He could see now, at least a little. Mr. Slithern had taken a costume from a tall rack along one wall. It was hard to see details, but it had a long flowing cape.

"You can see the accuracy of the skeleton. It would fit the boy."

"I'm having trouble seeing much of anything," Sam's mother said.

"I am, too," Sam put in, keeping his voice polite. "Could you turn on a light?"

"I cannot." Mr. Slithern's voice was tight, annoyed.

"Could we carry the costumes into the other room then?" Sam's mother held out her hand and after a second's hesitation, Mr. Slithern handed her the hanger. She turned so quickly that she almost ran into Sam. "Let's go take a look at this one in the light," she whispered. "You can't tell anything in here. It could be moth-eaten."

Compared to the back room, the front part of the shop was light and clean. It seemed absolutely cheery and the dust was barely noticeable.

"Oh, Sam," he heard his mother sigh. She turned around.

Sam caught his breath. His mother was holding the costume up against her chest. The cape was flowing black cloth, shiny and slick, with a dark gold lining that shimmered even in the dim light. The stretchy tights had leg bones painted

on them. The top had a rib cage and spine. His mother was looking at the seams in the cape.

"This is beautifully sewn, Sammy. Perfectly made." She looked up and past him at Mr. Slithern. "This really is a lovely cape. Where do you have your costumes made?"

Mr. Slithern was silent and Sam's mother went on, explaining herself. "I'm involved in the local theater troupe and we often have to rent costumes—our wardrobe isn't as extensive as we would like it to be and we got a donation recently for more costumes so . . ."

"The place where this was made is no longer open." Mr. Slithern's voice was low and Sam thought he sounded angry.

"Oh, what a shame," Sam's mother said. She held out the costume. "Try it on, Sam." She looked up again. "You do have a dressing room, don't you?"

Mr. Slithern coughed a little, an odd hollow sound. Sam took the hanger from his mother. She was looking more carefully at the costumes on the other racks now, making little sounds of delight at the workmanship.

"Where's your dressing room?" Sam asked Mr. Slithern.

"Down the hall." The old man pointed toward the back of the shop. Sam took a deep breath and walked through the racks of ruffles and lace and velvet, following Mr. Slithern's gesture. He hadn't noticed a hall, or another door, but, sure enough, when he got to the far end of the shop,

he found a door standing partly open, nearly hidden by a rack filled with suits of armor. As he passed, Sam draped the costume he was carrying over his left arm so that his right hand was free. He brushed the armor lightly. It felt cool under his touch, like real metal.

"Sam?" It was his mother. He turned back to see her following him. "I'll just, ah . . . walk you down the hall."

Sam nodded, feeling a little silly but also relieved. He was certainly old enough to go to a dressing room by himself. On the other hand, this whole shop was a little strange.

As they went through the door, Sam blinked. There was a single, dim light bulb in the long hallway. It seemed to light up only the ceiling area a few feet around it. The light that fell upon the walls and down to the floor was so dim that it was as though the darkness in the hallway was heavier than normal darkness—harder to penetrate.

"These are *wonderful* costumes, Sam," his mother said as soon as they were through the door and out of Mr. Slithern's hearing. "Amazing, really. I don't think I've ever seen such beautifully made ones. Every detail is perfect."

Sam felt a strange prickling sensation as she spoke, as though his left arm was going to sleep. He raised it, the costume swinging a little as he clenched and unclenched his fist. The movement made the skeleton painted on the dark cloth seem even more real.

"Sam? Are you listening? Here, this must be it." Sam's mother stopped in front of another door. She turned the doorknob slowly, glancing back up the hallway. "I wish he would have just shown us where he meant," she whispered. "I think there's another door over there." She nodded farther down the hall. Sam strained to see in the murky light, but couldn't. "This must be it," Sam's mother said. She eased the door open a crack.

"Not that door! Leave that one closed."

Mr. Slithern's voice was so loud Sam flinched. His mother snatched her hand from the doorknob and took a quick step backward. "Mr. Slithern! You startled me."

Sam saw Mr. Slithern standing near the door that led back into the shop. He was shaking his head. "I expect my customers to leave the private areas in my home alone."

Sam's mother took in a quick breath and apologized. "I had no idea, Mr. Slithern. You told Sam the dressing room was down the hall."

"And so it is," Mr. Slithern said in his grating voice. "The second door."

Sam was ready to turn around and leave. He was tired of jumping out of his skin every time that Mr. Slithern decided to say something. He was tired of the dusty-musty smell.

"Come on, Sam," his mother insisted, tugging at his arm. "You should have said it was the second door," she added, glancing back at Mr. Slithern. Sam followed her down the hall. There *was*

a second door, on the opposite side. "This one?" Sam's mother directed the question over his head, at Mr. Slithern, who still stood just inside the hallway door. His cape hung in a liquid semicircle around his body. Sam stared at him. Did he always wear a cape? There was another long pause before Mr. Slithern answered.

"Yes. That is the dressing room."

"Thank you," Sam's mother said. She put her hand on the doorknob and pushed it open. The dressing room was pitch dark inside. Sam reached past his mother and patted the wall, looking for a light switch.

"You will need to use this." Mr. Slithern's voice was suddenly close, too close. Sam's mother took in a startled breath and Sam leaned back and saw the old man standing right beside them, holding out a lit candle. Had he *run* down the hall? What did he do, keep candles in his pockets or something? Sam took it from him and stood awkwardly. A candle? How was he supposed to see well enough in the mirror to know if the costume fit him well or not?

"Go on and try it on, Sam," his mother said. "I'll wait right here." Sam waited for his mother to step away from the door, then went in, holding the candle out in front of him.

The dressing room was small—maybe it had been a bathroom once. There was a small rust-stained sink in one corner. Candle wax had hardened onto the old porcelain surface of the flat area that had served as a soap dish. Sam set

the candleholder there and turned around slowly. There was no mirror. He sighed. This place was ridiculous.

Sam found a nail in the wall and hung the costume. It had six pieces. There were black tights and a top, painted to look like a skeleton, front and back. Then there was a hood—sort of a stretch-skull complete with small, almost unnoticeable holes for his eyes. There were gloves, too, painted delicately on both sides to look like the small complicated bones in a person's hand. And there was the amazing cape.

Sam pulled off his clothes quickly. Even with his mother standing guard outside the door, he didn't feel comfortable in this dusty, weird little room.

The stretchy tights and top went on easily. As Sam pulled them on, the cloth seemed to almost mold itself to his body. The skeleton bones seemed to come alive as he moved. As he straightened up, the costume felt like a second skin. The fit was perfect, the cloth soft. He put on the hood, then the gloves.

Sam pulled the cape from the hook. He swung it back, put his arms over his head, and pulled the banded collar around his neck. Once it was on, the cape felt as good as the rest of the costume. It wasn't as heavy as he'd expected it to be.

"How is it?" his mother called from outside in the hallway.

"It fits," Sam told her, opening the door. She

gasped. Sam smiled and stepped closer to the candle so the light shone on the painted bones.

"I think it's incredible," his mother said quietly. "I want to look at it in the daylight, though." Sam glanced past her, arching his brows. "Mr. Slithern went back up front," she told him. "The second you went inside, he was gone."

"Should I leave the candle?"

Sam's mother hesitated. "I think so. It isn't going to fall over and if it does, that old sink isn't going to catch on fire."

Sam followed his mother down the dim little hall, feeling the swoop of the cape behind him. It was a really great costume. He could tell without looking in a mirror. He could tell by the way it *felt*. As they went back through the door into the main room of the shop, Sam walked with an exaggerated swagger, just to feel the cape swing.

"Perfect fit," Mr. Slithern commented as they came in. He had been rearranging some of the dresses and he went back to it as soon as he had made his remark. Sam smiled, but, of course, Mr. Slithern wouldn't have been able to tell anyway. There was a narrow slit in the painted stretch-skull for his mouth, but unless he yawned, it wouldn't open far enough to allow Mr. Slithern to see that his mouth had moved at all. Mr. Slithern wasn't looking at him anymore anyway.

"Where's your mirror?" Sam's mother asked.

Mr. Slithern looked up and extended one bony finger to point at the wall. Sam saw a murky, slender mirror beside the little counter that held

the cash register. He made his way through the racks of clothes and stood in front of it.

For an instant, Sam could barely breathe. The skeleton looked real. Too real. Unsettled, he turned quickly to look at his mother. She grinned at him.

"It looks absolutely wonderful, Sammy. Can you see it well enough to tell how good it is?"

Sam nodded. The costume was terrific—but he was feeling a little odd. It was strange how real the skeleton looked in the mirror. Sam stretched his arms out, watching the painted bones move in the mirror. It was eerie. He thought he could see the joints working—but that was impossible, of course.

"How much would it cost to rent this one for Halloween night?" Sam heard his mother ask.

"There are four of us on the Haunted-House Committee," Sam added quickly. Maybe the rate would be lower if Mr. Slithern knew there would be four customers involved, not just one.

"For four costumes? About two hundred dollars," Mr. Slithern said without looking up. Sam felt his mouth drop open. He slumped with disappointment and felt the cape slide a little on his shoulders.

"Just for the one night?" Sam's mother asked. Sam glanced at her. Her eyes were wide with surprise. "These four kids will be running the haunted house and a lot of people would be seeing the costumes. Half the town goes through

the Neal Elementary haunted house. It would be great advertising for you."

Sam held his breath. His mother was looking earnestly at Mr. Slithern. The problem was, he wasn't looking back at her. He was still rearranging dresses on the rack he had been working on when they walked in. When he didn't answer for what seemed like five minutes, Sam's mother asked the question again.

"Do you think that you could make a better price for the children than that? They have a little money to work with from the PTA and the school treasury, but not nearly enough to be able to afford a costume fee that high."

Mr. Slithern finally looked up at her. "My costumes are better than anything they will find elsewhere. By far."

"We were thinking about driving into the city tomorrow," Sam's mother said. "Just to look around and see what's available there."

Sam glanced at her, arching his eyebrows. She was pushing pretty hard. Mr. Slithern looked up at her. "Have a nice drive."

Sam's mother let out a sharp breath. "Thank you. We will. Sam, go take off the costume. We need to go now."

"You ought to take another look in there, first," Mr. Slithern said, glancing up and jutting his chin at the door that led to the back room. "See if I even have what you want for the others."

Sam's mother gave him a little thumb's-up sign and led the way into the back room. As they stood

still, waiting for their eyes to adjust, she whispered. "He's thinking about what I said. He sent us in here to have a little more time to consider giving you a discount."

Sam leaned toward her and whispered back. "Mom, it would have to be a huge discount to make it possible."

"How much money do you have?"

"Beth said there's about a hundred dollars in the Halloween carnival fund that's been reserved for us. But that's for everything, Mom. Costumes and supplies and whatever else we think up between now and the night of the carnival."

"Finding what you need?"

The raspy voice was right behind them and Sam jumped. He heard his mother make a small sound of annoyance. It seemed like Mr. Slithern had tried to startle them.

"We haven't even begun to look," Sam's mother said. "It takes a moment to be able to see in this room. The lights are rather low."

Mr. Slithern moved past them. "I have no trouble at all. What kind of costumes did you want to see?"

"Sam?"

Sam thought about it. "The skeleton is fine for me. Maybe a vampire for Jason. The Grim Reaper would be good for Beth and . . ." Sam trailed off, unsure of what else to say. Beth would *love* being the Grim Reaper, carrying a sharp-looking, curve-bladed scythe around all night—acting the part of the legendary figure who came to take

people when it was their time to die. Jason would like being a vampire, he was pretty sure. But he didn't know what Adelia would like.

"How about this?" Mr. Slithern was holding up a costume that Sam couldn't see clearly. Sam squinted, trying to focus. "It's a mummy," Mr. Slithern said impatiently.

Sam nodded. "A mummy would be great."

"Can we take these out into the other room?" Sam's mother asked.

There was a metallic shuffling sound and Sam realized that Mr. Slithern was going through the racks, sliding the hangers over one at a time. "I will find the others," he said. "Then you will see that you won't find anything like my costumes in the city or anywhere else."

Sam's mother took hold of Sam's arm and turned him around gently. "We'll just wait out here, then," she said, leading Sam along. Once they were back through the door, she bent to whisper again. "I don't like this guy. But the costumes are spectacular. So we should at least look at what he has."

Sam nodded, looking down at the shiny black cloth that draped around his shoulders and swung to about three inches from the floor. The fit was so perfect, it was as though someone had made this particular costume for him alone. For a second, he imagined what it would be like to be a skeleton—to walk around with his bones clanking, his skull a peeled, bare, ivory-colored

shell. The idea made him shiver. He bared his teeth, thinking about it.

"Oh, my gosh," his mother breathed.

Sam looked around, wondering what had happened. He could hear Mr. Slithern, still sliding hangers, looking for the costumes. His mother was staring at him.

"What, Mom?"

"When you grimaced like that, you . . ."

Sam waited for her to finish. She shook her head. "For a second, it looked so real . . ."

Sam smiled. "This place is getting to you, Mom."

She smiled back at him. "I guess it is."

"Here we are," Mr. Slithern said, coming out of the back room. Draped over his left arm were three hangers. Sam saw the most incredible mask he had ever seen in his life clipped to one of them with a clothes pin.

Sam *really* wanted these costumes now. He couldn't imagine how in the world they could afford them, though. Even if Mr. Slithern cut his price in half, it would be way too much. Sam crossed his fingers and closed his eyes long enough to make it an official wish. Maybe Beth was right about wishing. Sam sure hoped that she was.

"We'll need a couple of witch's costumes, too, I think," Sam's mother said. "Just in case." She winked at Sam. "I'd love to help out anyway, and I bet Emma would. You'll have to ask her."

Sam smiled beneath his stretchy skull. He had

known his mother and Aunt Emma would want to get involved. They'd be the best haunted-house witches ever.

Sam pulled his cape closer around his shoulders. He glanced at his mother as she looked at the witch costumes Mr. Slithern had brought out of the back room. Whatever it took, he was going to get these costumes for the Halloween Carnival Haunted-House Committee. He smiled at Mr. Slithern, baring his teeth and swirling the cape a little.

"I think," Mr. Slithern said, "that you had better go take the costume off now."

Sam felt his heart constrict. He didn't want to take the costume off, but he nodded and turned, heading for the hallway door. In the dressing room, as he took off the cape, he felt his spirits sinking. All day long he had been excited and eager to get to work on the haunted house. Now he just felt tired—and sad. *Really* sad.

Sam tried to shake off the feeling, but he couldn't. He knew it didn't make sense, but the costumes had become just about the most important thing in the world to him. He turned to open the door. The costume swung on the hanger and he heard a strange noise, like bones rattling.

"You have to see these costumes," Sam told the committee two days later. They were on their way to his Aunt Emma's for their first committee meeting at her house. It was a sunny day and Sam felt good.

As they started toward Aunt Emma's, Sam turned around and walked backwards, facing the others. "You are going to go crazy over the costumes. They are so cool you won't believe it."

Adelia tossed her head. The dozens of tiny braids that framed her face danced with the motion. "They must be amazing. You haven't talked about anything else for two days."

Beth laughed, a snorting sound that always made Sam smile even when whatever she was laughing at wasn't very funny. Jason was shaking his head. "But I don't see how we can possibly come up with two hundred dollars in a week."

"Or a month," Adelia added. "Or two months.

Sam, get real. We have enough to do without setting our sights on something impossible."

Sam shrugged. He knew she was probably right. He had known it that day, standing in Mr. Slithern's costume shop. He didn't care. "We just have to. Maybe he'll be willing to come down on his price. My mother thinks he might."

Jason was frowning now. "Adelia is right. We have a lot to think about without trying to figure out a way to raise that much money. We should be spending our time figuring out how to ask your aunt if she'll let us use her house. Now that's an idea that would make this haunted house incredible."

Beth stood up straighter, looking proud of herself. "It would. Sam? How should we bring it up?"

Sam shook his head. "I don't know. Not the second we walk in the door, that's for sure. Let's just see if we can get her involved. I told you, she and my mom love stuff like this."

Jason kicked at a pebble in the gutter. Sam walked in silence, leading them down the sidewalk. Once they got to the corner of Tenth Street, he stopped and pointed. "There it is."

"Ooooh," Beth said. "The two-story one? The dark brick house?"

Sam nodded. "I admit it would be perfect."

Adelia nodded, her braids bouncing. "If she'll let us—"

"We'll be heroes for the rest of the year," Jason interrupted. Everyone laughed a little.

"Okay," Sam said. "Let's go. Just everyone be

polite and nice and try to get her interested in the idea of a haunted house."

Sam lifted the knocker on the heavy oak door of his aunt's house, then let it fall. There was no doorbell. There never had been one—it was an old house. The knocker was made of brass, with a lion's head worked into the design. The brass was old and discolored. The lion's mane was nearly black.

"Cool," Beth said as they waited on the porch. "This would make such a great entrance to a haunted house."

Sam nodded. It would. The porch steps were steep and narrow. People would have to wait outside for a minute—they could play spooky music to get people in the right mood before they even let them in the front door. Maybe they could have someone dressed as a witch out here, talking about scary stuff to the people waiting in line. In fact, Aunt Emma would be perfect for that. Or his mother.

The door opened and there was no one standing there. Beth caught her breath and Sam heard Adelia make a nervous little giggle. Jason was in back and couldn't see, but he moved to one side when no one said anything, trying to figure out what was going on. The door swung open a little wider. There still wasn't anyone there.

"Boo!"

The voice came from behind them and they all jumped, including Sam—even though he should

have known that his Aunt Emma might do something like this.

"Hi!" Aunt Emma said brightly. Her eyes were twinkling with mischief and her brown, curly hair was even wilder than usual. She had probably run all the way around the house after opening the door. Her cheeks were flushed. Sam introduced the members of the committee.

"Come in, come in," Aunt Emma said, walking past them and through the door. Sam gestured and the others went in, Adelia leading the way. As they went into the living room, Sam could see everybody looking around. He knew they were imagining what it would be like to have the haunted house there.

The front door opened onto a hall, which led straight through the center of the house to the back door. To the right was a long narrow room his aunt used as a guest room. To the left was the living room. Farther down the hall a high arch led off to the left and into the dining room. Past it was the kitchen, then the little back den. The hall went on past both, straight to the back door.

"You have a really neat house," Jason said politely. Then he cleared his throat, glancing at Sam. Sam frowned at him. They needed to get Aunt Emma interested first—*before* they said anything about using her house.

"Well, I should get out of your way, kids. I'll bring some lemonade in a few minutes."

"No, you can stay and listen," Sam said

quickly. Aunt Emma was already halfway to the hall door.

She stopped and turned around. "You want me to stay?"

Adelia sat down on the couch and Beth plunked down beside her. "We thought you could . . . ah . . . Sam says you are an actor?"

Aunt Emma shot Sam a wry grin. "Sometimes. When I can."

"He said you could teach us how to make fake blood," Beth put in.

Aunt Emma nodded. "No problem. We can do it any day you want to. The ingredients come right out of a grocery store."

Jason whistled in amazement. "A grocery store?"

Aunt Emma nodded, then she looked past them, out the window, and frowned. "I thought I saw someone walk past outside. I'll be back in a minute." She left the room, her stride long and purposeful.

"She's really nice," Beth said.

Sam nodded. "That doesn't mean she'll let us use her house."

Beth crossed her legs, sitting back against the cushions. "I know. But I *wished.*"

Sam smiled at her and Adelia laughed softly. Jason looked puzzled and Sam realized that he had only lived in Middleton a year or so. Jason hadn't gone to first and second grade with Beth like Sam and Adelia had. "Beth is famous for her wishes," Sam explained. Jason nodded, but he

still looked confused. "She just *wishes* and a lot of the time, stuff comes true," Sam added. It was true, but he didn't want to sound as goofy as Beth did about it.

A strange, high moaning sound from the hallway startled them all. Sam turned around. Jason and Adelia jumped up, facing the doorway. Beth sat still, but her face went pale. "I have a feeling that isn't exactly a ghost," Sam said.

Aunt Emma came around the corner, smiling. "Just auditioning for a part in the haunted house. I really do love Halloween." She shook her head as everyone sat back down, grinning and shaking their heads.

"That was weird, though," she added. "I could have sworn I saw someone walk by the window, headed toward the backyard. But there isn't anyone there."

Adelia looked up. "Maybe it was the meter reader? Or someone from the cable company or something?"

Aunt Emma shook her head, then nodded. "I guess it's possible. I'll go look again in a few minutes. So." She met Sam's eyes. "Tell me about your haunted house."

Sam cleared his throat. "We haven't got very much worked out yet. We're just now getting started." Jason had been standing near the window, looking out. Now he turned around and looked at Aunt Emma.

"We thought we'd do it like the rooms of a house," he said slowly, glancing at Sam. "I mean,

we thought we'd have a kitchen with weird-looking food on a stove and a dining room with horrible stuff on plates like it was a dinner all laid out and ready to be eaten."

"Blue food," Aunt Emma said instantly. "Blue always looks odd on a plate. Blue goo would work for one dish, certainly."

Sam and the girls laughed. Jason smiled and shrugged. He sat down in an armchair opposite the couch. "Sure. Blue goo. And gopher-guts soup and peeled grapes for eyeballs and—"

"You can make good eyeballs out of small boiled eggs," Aunt Emma interrupted. "You can peel them, then draw the details on them with markers. You can use fine-tipped red markers to make bloodshot eyes, black markers for the pupils and so on. Or make a really stiff milk gelatin, then use a melon baller to cut them out."

"Neat," Jason said. We can have a huge plate of eyeballs on the center of the table."

Everyone murmured and smiled. Sam could tell they already liked Aunt Emma. It was obvious that she liked them too, at least so far. When one of them finally asked about using her house, she might change her mind. It was a lot to ask. There would be at least two hundred kids and parents going through the haunted house.

"What other ideas have you had?"

Sam pointed up at the ceiling without thinking and then lowered his finger slowly, feeling his aunt's attentive gaze. "We thought we might tape thread to the ceiling and make it like a whole

room full of spider webs that people have to walk through."

"How will you manage a ceiling in the gym?" Aunt Emma asked. "You'll have wall partitions, right? Like last year's?"

Jason cleared his throat. "Well, actually, we were hoping to make it a little different than last year's."

"Or even," Adelia put in, "a whole lot different."

Aunt Emma smiled and waited, her eyebrows arched with curiosity and interest. "Different how?"

Sam wished that they hadn't gotten around to asking his aunt about using her house this soon. He had wanted to spend a lot of time getting her excited about helping. He paced over to the window. He meant to turn back, but a sudden movement on the other side of the glass caught his eye. He went closer, trying to see. There was a huge evergreen tree on the side of the house and whatever had made the motion had either disappeared into the tree branches, or had gone around the tree so quickly that he couldn't track its movements.

"Did you see something?" Aunt Emma asked.

Sam turned back. "Probably a bird."

His aunt nodded. Sam noticed that everyone was glaring at him. For a second, he was puzzled, then he understood. They had been expecting him to ask Aunt Emma about using her house—and he hadn't.

"How do you intend to make the haunted house

different this year?" Aunt Emma asked again. "Neal Elementary has had some pretty outstanding haunted houses over the years—it'll be hard to think of something really new."

"They're always great," Sam said quickly. "We just want ours to be special."

"We were thinking," Jason began, then stopped, his eyes darting from Aunt Emma's to Sam's, then back. Sam frowned. They were rushing this too much.

"We thought we would have a witch out front," Sam said into the silence. "Where people are standing in line."

Aunt Emma shifted her gaze to him. "A witch?"

Sam nodded. "Just to warm up the crowd. She could talk to the people, and cackle and scare them a little, just sort of getting them ready for the *really* scary parts."

Aunt Emma was nodding. "Good idea." She waited, an attentive expression on her face.

"We wanted to get someone who could really, you know, act out the part," Sam went on. He watched Aunt Emma's face and saw a spark of interest light up her eyes. "Someone who could do a lot more than just cackle and say stupid stuff about frogs' toes and eyes of newt."

Sam paused long enough for everyone to shift around on their seats, including Aunt Emma. He was pretty sure it was working, though, because Aunt Emma's eyes were practically glowing with interest. And she was the one who finally broke the silence.

"You have someone in mind for the witch?"

Sam nodded, smiling. "You. If you will."

Aunt Emma grinned. "Oh, I would love to. You know your mother will want to, though, Sam."

"We can come up with a part for her, too," Beth broke in. "We thought about having a witch in the—ah, the—" She stopped abruptly and glanced at Sam. "In the kitchen we set up," Beth finished, her voice low.

Aunt Emma was looking at Beth, her head tilted, her eyes intent. Then she switched her attention to Sam. "What are you guys up to?"

He shrugged. "Huh? What do you mean?"

Aunt Emma shook her head. "I don't know. You're acting funny. All of you." Sam ducked his head and stared at the carpet. When he looked up, she was still staring at him. "Come on, Sam Basket," she said. "What's bothering you? What's going on?"

Sam smiled sheepishly. "We had a great idea." He stopped and shook his head. "Actually, it's Beth's idea. But we all love it."

He looked around the room. Beth was nodding. So were Jason and Adelia. Aunt Emma had folded her arms again and was sitting still. Sam took a deep breath. "We were thinking that it would be really cool if someone would let us use their house. For the haunted house, I mean."

Sam watched Aunt Emma's face. He knew the second she understood what he'd meant because her whole face changed, her eyes widening and

her eyebrows going up. Then she smiled, very slowly. "This house? My house?"

Beth leaned forward. "Sam said you would be one of the few people he could think of who would even consider doing it."

Aunt Emma laughed, still looking at Sam. "How many people come to the carnival? How many would come here?"

Sam shrugged. "Maybe three hundred. Probably fewer," he added quickly. "Especially if we have it here. People might not want to walk three blocks to get here. They might not want to drive, either. It would mean parking again—some people hate to do that."

Aunt Emma nodded in agreement. "But it could be, theoretically, everyone who comes to the carnival. What's the turnout usually? Does anyone know?" She looked from Sam's face to Adelia's, then at Jason and Beth. They all shook their heads. She looked up at the ceiling, then down at the carpet. "My guess would be a few hundred. Wow!" She paused a long time, looking around the room. "It'd sure be fun though."

Sam nodded enthusiastically, trying to keep the excitement in his voice under control. "It'd be so perfect. We could lay out a whole meal of icky food in the dining room and there could be a witch—"

"In the kitchen," Aunt Emma finished for him. "Now I see why you were all so reluctant to share your ideas. You didn't know if you could think in terms of using the house or not."

Sam nodded again. "Can we?"

Aunt Emma looked at him, hard. "Let's talk about it. There are areas I would want to be off limits. There are valuables and breakables I would want to move to safety."

"We would do all that, of course," Jason put in.

"We sure would," Beth said. Her eyes were sparkling. "We'll get everything ready and we'll clean up afterwards, too." Everyone nodded.

The conversation went on. Aunt Emma got out some paper and pencils and they tried to think of everything that they wanted to do to the house to make it the most amazing haunted house ever. Then they thought of everything that could go wrong—and how to prevent it. Aunt Emma kept them busy making lists and copying them over when someone got an idea that changed everything. Before Sam realized how late it was getting, Beth suddenly stood up.

"I'm sorry, but look." She pointed out the window. "It's going to be dark before long. I better go home now."

"I can drive everyone," Aunt Emma offered.

"I only live a few blocks away," Beth said. "I can walk."

Aunt Emma nodded. "Call your mother first, then, and tell her you're about to start. Give her my phone number, too. If we're going to keep having meetings here, we have to get organized."

She recited her phone number while they all copied it down. Then she went to the kitchen to

get her car keys. As Sam and the others waited in the living room, they heard her sudden gasp.

"Aunt Emma?" Sam called. "Are you all right?"

She came into the living room. "It must be all this talk about Halloween spooky stuff."

Sam frowned. "What?"

Aunt Emma shook her head. "I thought I saw someone outside again. A white-haired man wearing a cape. Then a second later there was no one—just the shape of the trees and the flower bed." She passed one hand back through her hair. "I could see how I imagined it. I mean the basic shapes are there, in the tree trunk and the white flowers." She shook her head. "First I imagined the meter reader, and now this. Boy, am I feeling silly."

Sam joked and laughed with the others, but his heart had speeded up a little. A white-haired man in a cape? It was impossible. Don't be stupid, he told himself. Mr. Slithern wouldn't be standing in Aunt Emma's flower bed. It was absolutely impossible. Sam shook his head, glad no one could hear his thoughts.

4

The next meeting of the Haunted-House Committee was two days later. This time, as they sat down in Aunt Emma's living room, Sam saw them all looking around, thinking about cool things they could do to the house. Sam glanced out the window five or six times, but of course there was no one there. Why would there be?

Adelia and Beth were talking quietly, their heads close together. Then Beth looked up. "We should think through what we want to do in each room, then make a list of what we're going to need to buy."

"Good idea," Sam agreed. He got paper and a pencil out of his backpack and got ready to take notes.

"First we have to decide which rooms we want to use," Aunt Emma said. "I'd like to keep it on the first floor. That would give you the entryway, the spare bedroom, the kitchen, the living room, the dining room and the little den in back."

Sam wrote down the name of each room at the head of a separate piece of paper. Then, everyone started talking at once. They had so many good ideas, it was hard to keep up with everything. Sam tried.

"So, in the kitchen," Sam said after a few minutes, "we can have Mom as a witch stirring up some awful gross stuff. Then, in the dining room, we can have the whole meal laid out."

"With a centerpiece like at a banquet, except everything will be yucky," Jason put in.

Beth grinned. "And in the spare bedroom we can have the blindfolds and the bowls of slimy stuff for people to touch."

Sam nodded and kept writing. By the time they had made five separate lists of supplies they would need for each room, most of their meeting time was gone.

"I think," Aunt Emma said, "that we should go down to this costume shop Sam has been telling us about and check it out."

Beth sighed and looked at Sam. "I thought we had agreed to give that idea up. Because of the high prices."

Aunt Emma smiled. "My sister, Sam's mother, called me up last night and went on and on about the wonderful costumes Mr. Slithern has. She made me promise we'd at least go see. And she said she thought Mr. Slithern might come down on his rental fees if we explained to him again that practically half the town would see the costumes."

Aunt Emma stood up and shooed everyone toward the front door. They barely fit into her old Volvo. All the way there, Sam was quiet. This just had to work out. It just had to. When Aunt Emma braked in front of Slithern's Costume Shop, Sam was fiddling with his seat belt. The instant she came to a stop in a parking place, he had it off and was opening the car door.

Sam paced the sidewalk while the others got out and gathered in a little knot on the sidewalk and Aunt Emma got her purse and locked up her car.

Sam grinned at them. "You are not going to believe—"

"These costumes," Beth finished for him.

"Sam's mom told me they are the nicest costumes she's ever seen—and she's been in lots of plays and stuff," Aunt Emma said. Sam was grateful to her for defending him. He knew everyone was a little tired of hearing him talk so much about Slithern's amazing costumes. But now they would see why he was so excited.

"I think this is a waste of time," Beth groused as they went up to the door.

Sam ignored her. He opened the shop door and gestured impatiently for Beth to go in. He followed her. Adelia came just after them, with Aunt Emma and Jason bringing up the rear.

Just inside the door, they all stopped, blinking. The shop was every bit as dark and dusty as Sam remembered it. "Mr. Slithern?" Sam called. There

was no answer. Sam cleared his throat. "Mr. Slithern?" Once again, no one responded.

"Well, he has to be here somewhere," Aunt Emma said. "Or someone does. I'm sure he doesn't leave his shop unattended for very long. We can just look around until he shows up."

Sam nodded and went immediately to the door that led to the back room. "All the really amazing stuff is in here," he said over his shoulder. He turned the doorknob, but it seemed stuck. He rattled it a little, gently. It still wouldn't open.

"Maybe he has to unlock it?" Beth suggested.

Sam shook his head, trying to recall. He was pretty sure that the door hadn't been locked before. He tried again to turn the knob, then gave up and looked around, disappointed. Whether it had been last time or not, the back room was locked now. Sam blinked, staring into the corners of the front room. Mr. Slithern couldn't be far away, could he? Aunt Emma was right. He wouldn't just go out for a sandwich or something and leave the shop open.

"These are beautiful," Aunt Emma said, her voice low and reverent. She was going down one of the racks, looking at one dress, then another. "Look at the detail on this." She held up a dress that had a hundred flounces sewn into the cloth. It looked like a ball gown for a plantation owner's daughter in a play about the South. Aunt Emma pulled out another hanger. "And look at this!"

Adelia shrieked with delight and reached out to feel the flowing white cloth. "What is this?"

Aunt Emma smiled. "Silk. Really nice silk. I've never seen costumes this well made. Jenny was right."

Adelia looked up. "Who?"

"Jenny is my mother's name," Sam explained.

"And she's my sister," Aunt Emma added. "My little sister. We've always loved clothes, both of us. Oh, how we used to argue over borrowing each other's sweaters in high school." Adelia laughed as Sam gave the doorknob one last try.

Abruptly, the door seemed to fling itself inward. Sam leapt backward as the doorknob was wrenched from his hand. He was startled into crying out.

Mr. Slithern stood in the doorway, his white hair flowing down over his collar. He was still wearing a cape—but this one was white, and fell almost to the floor. It hung loosely across his bony shoulders. Sam shot a glance at Aunt Emma, remembering the white-haired man she had imagined in her garden. Her face was blank as she looked at Mr. Slithern. If he resembled her optical illusion of white flowers and trees, she gave no sign of it.

"Who gave you permission to come into the back room?" Mr. Slithern demanded.

Sam blinked, startled a second time by the roughness of Mr. Slithern's voice. "I'm sorry," he managed. "I was in here the other day with my mother and you let us look through the Halloween costumes—"

"He's been telling us all for days how wonderful

they are," Aunt Emma interrupted. Her voice was polite, but there was a no-nonsense tone to it, too. She almost never let people get away with being rude to her. "We've all been looking forward to coming to your shop."

Mr. Slithern looked at her. As Sam watched, his expression changed from angry to friendly. Or at least on anyone else's face, the expression would have looked friendly. Sam realized that he hadn't really looked very closely at Mr. Slithern when he and his mother had been in the shop. Mr. Slithern really was an odd-looking man. His forehead was very high, his eyebrows a white hairy ridge that shadowed his eyes. He had an odd expression in his eyes.

"We would like to take a look at the Halloween costumes, if we might," Aunt Emma said, so politely that Sam almost laughed aloud. If Mr. Slithern had known her, he would have realized that this tone of voice wasn't politeness. It was almost the opposite, in fact. This was Aunt Emma's way of pointing out to people that they had been less than polite to *her*.

"You may look," Mr. Slithern said, after a long pause. He stood to one side of the door and swept his arm out, like a butler in an old movie. Sam took a hesitant step forward, then bolted past Mr. Slithern and into the back room. He heard Aunt Emma and the others following close behind.

Sam went straight to the rack where his skeleton costume had been. It was still there. As he

touched the slick, shiny cloth of the cape, Sam felt himself relax. It was an odd sensation—like he had been nervous about a spelling test or something, that had finally turned out well. He touched the cool, smooth surface of the painted bones. Sam looked back toward the door. He wanted the others to understand why they had to have these costumes. They just *had* to.

"Wow!" It was Jason's voice. Sam turned to see Jason pulling a hanger out, staring at a vampire costume.

"That's the one I thought you'd like," Sam said, smiling. He turned and went up and down the racks quickly, searching, his fingertips brushing each costume as he walked. Then, finally, he saw it. "Here. Adelia, I thought you could be a mummy. Look at how real this looks. You could walk sort of stiff and weird and make groany noises."

Adelia took the hanger from him. "Cool," she said quietly, touching the strands of inch-wide white cloth that seemed to be "peeling" away from the mummy's wrappings. She made an experimental groan. It sounded pretty spooky in the dim back room of the shop. Aunt Emma laughed.

"He has a dressing room if you want to try them on," Sam told Jason and Adelia.

"I will show you," Mr. Slithern said from his position near the door. He sounded a little irritated—impatient. Sam was startled at the sound of his voice.

"Girls, go together," Aunt Emma said. "Then the boys can have a turn."

"Try this one, Beth," Sam said, searching the hangers for the Grim Reaper. It was easy to find because of the plastic scythe blade sticking up. It was fastened to the hanger with thin wire twists.

Sam looked up to see Mr. Slithern holding the candle, waiting. He must keep that candle in his pocket, Sam thought.

Adelia and Beth went through the hall door, following Mr. Slithern. Aunt Emma went last. Sam could hear their voices as they went into the dressing room. Adelia was giggling.

A moment later Mr. Slithern came back alone. He stood silently by the door. Sam kept glancing at him, wondering how he could talk Mr. Slithern into giving them a discount on the costumes. A big discount. He decided to try his mother's idea again.

"I don't know if you understood my mom the other day," Sam began.

"Understood what?" Mr. Slithern's face was in the shadows. It was impossible to read his expression.

Sam swallowed. There was something odd about the way Mr. Slithern spoke. His voice sounded far away—like he was calling up out of a deep well. Sam took a big breath and started talking. "She told you that we're the Haunted-House Committee for Neal Elementary's Halloween Carnival."

Mr. Slithern didn't say anything and Sam took

another deep breath and started over. "I was hoping we could get a discount on the costume rentals. There will be a lot of people coming through the haunted house. They'll see your costumes and it will be good free advertising for your shop. My mother said she doesn't think many people even know it's here—or she would have heard about it herself. She's in almost every play in town. She and my Aunt Emma are going to be the witches at the haunted house."

Mr. Slithern reached up and touched his own cheek thoughtfully. "How many people?"

Mr. Slithern had waited so long to speak that it took Sam a second to understand the question. "Oh, several hundred at least," he said carefully. It was probably true. There was going to be a big crowd. Of that much he was sure.

Mr. Slithern stood silently for a long time. Sam kept quiet. Jason kept ooohing and ahhhing over different costumes, but he was carrying the vampire outfit with him as he looked.

"Perhaps we could make an agreement," Mr. Slithern said slowly.

Sam crossed his fingers. He was holding the skeleton costume close against his side. "What kind of an agreement?"

"Perhaps you could use the costumes for this one night free."

Sam nearly shouted with joy. Free? Free! It was more than he had ever hoped for—better than he could have wished. "Thank you," he stammered. "We can't thank you enough. We—"

"You will do something for me in return?" Mr. Slithern asked.

"Of course," Sam said, then he hesitated. "I mean, if we can."

Mr. Slithern laughed, a low rumbling sound. "Oh, it is a simple thing. First, you must promise me that you will wear your costumes the entire night, masks and all. And then you must let me hand out these cards to each and every person that comes into your aunt's house."

Mr. Slithern gestured for Sam to follow, then whirled, cape flaring, and stalked back into the front part of the shop. Next to the old-fashioned cash register, he bent down. When he straightened he had a small gray box extended in one hand. "My cards." Sam reached for the box.

"No!" Mr. Slithern stopped him. "No one must open it until the evening of the haunted house. It is unlucky."

Sam shrugged. He didn't care how superstitious Mr. Slithern was. It made no difference at all to him whether he opened the box now or on Halloween night. All he cared about was the fact that they were going to get to use the costumes.

Sam heard Aunt Emma's laughter and the girls' voices as they came up the hall. They were talking fast, obviously excited. "These are just amazing," Adelia was saying as they emerged into the front of the shop. She was wearing the mummy costume. The bandages looked absolutely real. She had pulled a cloth-wrapped hood over her head. Aunt Emma guided her to the

cloudy mirror and Beth came to stand by Sam. Adelia made a little sound of astonishment at her own image.

The Grim Reaper mask was especially incredible, Sam thought, looking at Beth. It was almost as though it had facial expressions that changed as she spoke. "These costumes are going to be a lot more than we can possibly afford, Sam."

Sam shook his head, smiling. "I wished. They're free." He watched as Beth slid her mask up so that he could see her grin. "Really? Free? How?"

Sam glanced at Mr. Slithern. He was standing beside his old cash register, his eyes fixed on nothing in particular.

"Hey!" Jason called from the doorway. He had put on the vampire costume. Like all the others, it was perfect—more than perfect. It made Jason look dangerous, scary, pale and odd—exactly like Sam imagined a real vampire would look.

"These costumes," Aunt Emma said, looking from the girls to Jason, then back, "are really something. You all look great."

"And you haven't heard the best part," Sam said, smiling. As he explained about handing out the cards, Sam saw Mr. Slithern smiling and nodding. On anyone else, the smile might have looked kind or friendly. On Mr. Slithern it looked eerie and strange, like he had a secret that no one else would ever find out.

15

The day before the Halloween Carnival, the whole committee worked from sunrise until mid-afternoon moving Aunt Emma's treasures upstairs, rearranging furniture so that each room would hold more people, and setting up the haunted house. Sam went from one room to the next, helping out and trying to make sure that nothing was forgotten. By three o'clock, everyone was tired and ready to quit for the day. They had done about a million things, but it seemed like there were still a million left to do.

Sam tried to smile. "Let's get as organized for tomorrow as we can before we leave, okay?" They were sitting in Aunt Emma's living room. Everyone looked tired and a little dazed. Sam was sure he did too. But they were getting close, and the details were what would make the haunted house great. He didn't want to forget anything.

"At the last meeting, we divided up the work into separate lists," Sam said once everyone was

sitting down. Aunt Emma was sitting in the big armchair, where she usually sat for their meetings. Everyone else was on the long couch.

"The dummies are all finished and I know my speeches perfectly. I have all but four things done—and I can't do any of those until the day of the carnival," Beth said.

"I'm down to my last five things and it's the same as Beth. I know my speeches. I have to do everything tomorrow," Jason said. "All that's left is making the purple lumpy potato soup and the green milk—stuff like that."

Adelia yawned. "I have to make signs showing people where to park and finish the thread-hanging in the back hall. It'll take me another hour or two to finish, I think. And I should probably practice my speeches a little more."

"Maybe someone could help you," Aunt Emma put in.

Sam nodded. "I can. I only have to make the eyeballs and the intestines for the blindfold room. I have the table and bowls all set up."

Aunt Emma laughed. "Sounds awful when you say it like that. I suppose we can make the blood now."

"Let's do that," Beth said, grinning. "Sam said you learned how to do it working in the movies."

Aunt Emma nodded. "There are a bunch of different recipes. But this one is simple and edible, so if Jason wants to look like a real vampire, he can dribble a little from the corner of his mouth."

"Gross," Adelia said, smiling.

They followed Aunt Emma down the hall into the kitchen at the back of the house. It was almost ready. Bundles of herbs and phony, spray-on cobwebs hung from the ceiling to make it look like a witches' kitchen. They had put rubber frogs and spiders in clear cookie jars and set them along the counter, the way a normal family would have pasta or beans and peas displayed. They had piled the fruit bowls with apples, then put about a hundred plastic spiders and scorpions into them—arranging the fake bugs so that they looked like they were crawling through the fruit.

One of the best things they had done was to borrow an antique, iron soap cauldron from Adelia's uncle. It would be perfect with his mother stirring and cackling and telling the people what she was making. They were going to get dry ice to make it look like it was steaming.

"We start with this," Aunt Emma said, taking down a cereal bowl. Then she opened a cabinet and got down two big bottles of food coloring. Sam looked at the labels. One was red, the other was orange. Aunt Emma lifted down a third bottle. Blue.

"What's the blue for?" Beth asked.

Aunt Emma smiled. "For that last little touch of color that will make it look real. We mostly use red and orange, though."

She put a little water into the cereal bowl and began mixing the red and orange, adding a few drops of one, then a little of the other. Sam watched, leaning on the counter. "Here," Aunt

Emma said, sliding the bowl across to him. "Work with this until you have the color right. I'm going to get out the rest of what we need."

Beth, Adelia and Jason surrounded the counter, leaning over to see into the cereal bowl. Aunt Emma flipped on another light. Sam put in three more drops of red—which made the liquid look too dark, too red. So he added five drops of orange. Now the color was too orangey. He added more red.

"Nope," Jason said. "Now it's too red again. It looks like lipstick."

Sam kept fiddling with the food coloring. He could hear Aunt Emma banging around, looking in her cupboards, but he didn't look up to see what she was doing. He was concentrating too hard. After going back and forth from red to orange about six times, he hesitated, holding the red bottle over the bowl.

"No, leave it alone now," Beth said. "It's perfect."

Sam lowered the bottle as Adelia and Jason nodded in agreement.

"Got it?" Aunt Emma asked.

"I think so," Sam said. He straightened up and took a step away from the counter so that she could get close enough to the cereal bowl to see.

"Looks good to me."

"Now what?" Jason asked. "We have to make enough to fill six soup bowls, right?"

"Uh-huh," Adelia answered. "It's part of the

dinner menu for the dining room scene. Blood soup."

"This is going to be so amazing," Jason said in a hushed voice.

"It ought to be," Aunt Emma agreed. "You've worked really hard. All four of you."

"The costumes are going to make it even better," Beth said.

Sam thought about the skeleton costume and shivered a little in anticipation. They were all going to look terrific. It really was going to be the very best haunted house that Neal Elementary had ever had.

"It's great that you're letting us use your house," Jason said. "Thanks." Everyone nodded and Sam smiled at his aunt.

She smiled back. "I think it's going to be fun. I'll be the only person in this whole town who can say their house was used for a Neal Elementary haunted house. Quite a distinction, don't you think?"

Sam saw a little movement out of the corner of his eyes and looked past Aunt Emma to the kitchen window. He hadn't thought about Aunt Emma's imaginary white-haired man in a cape for a while. But now, as Aunt Emma was getting ready to show them the next step in making fake blood, he crossed the kitchen and looked outside. There was nothing there. He had probably seen a bird flit past or something. But he had a creepy feeling in his stomach.

You are standing here making fake blood for

blood soup, Sam lectured himself silently as he turned back. Did you expect to feel perfectly normal?

"We bought a lot of corn syrup," Aunt Emma said. She set four big bottles on the counter. "But we're going to need all of it, I think."

"My mother uses that stuff when she makes candy," Jason said.

Aunt Emma nodded. "It's very sweet. And it makes the phony blood look a lot more real than if you just use water. It's thicker. Now mix your colored water with the syrup until it looks right." She reached up into a cabinet and pulled down a huge pasta pot. "Here. This should hold enough."

Sam and Beth uncapped the clear syrup and poured three of the bottles into the pot. "Will we need the last one?" Beth asked.

"I think you should put it all in," Adelia said. "If we don't use all the blood for the soup, we'll think of something else to do with it, I'm sure."

"We have plenty of coloring," Aunt Emma said. "So go ahead."

Sam nodded and uncapped the fourth bottle. As he poured it into the pot, he saw another movement out of the corner of his eye. He turned and set the empty bottle back on the counter. This time the movement had been *inside,* over by the door that led back into the hallway. Sam could feel his own pulse for a few seconds. He shook his head, feeling silly.

"Is something wrong, Sam?" Aunt Emma asked him.

"I keep thinking that I'm seeing something out of the corner of my eye," Sam admitted. He waited for the rest of them to laugh at him, but they didn't.

"Me, too," Adelia said. "Like someone walking past."

Jason was nodding, and so was Aunt Emma.

"I think we all have ourselves jumpy and nervous from working so much," Aunt Emma said. "And after all, we have been talking about spooky stuff for a week now."

"And we're standing here making *blood,*" Jason added.

Sam felt a rush of relief so strong that it made him want to sit down for a moment. It was true. It had to be, if they were all feeling it.

"Now it needs just the tiniest touch of blue coloring," Aunt Emma said, pointing to the pot. "Not much at all. A tiny drop for the whole pot should be enough."

Sam picked up the blue coloring. He squeezed the plastic bottle very gently. One drop fell into the pasta pot.

"That's enough," Aunt Emma said. Sam turned the bottle upright and stared at the syrup mixture. Aunt Emma was nodding approvingly. "Stir it up now."

"It still doesn't look right," Jason said.

Aunt Emma smiled. "There's one more ingredient. A little white flour. Here." She went to the sink and got a little warm water in a small bowl. Then she put flour in and stirred the mixture for

a long time. "Last thing we want is lumps, right?"

Beth giggled. "The very last thing. This is neat."

The other kids made sounds of agreement and Sam watched his aunt beaming back at them. She was going to make a great witch. So would his mother. Aunt Emma poured the flour mixture into the pot of colored syrup and water. It was weird and amazing and incredible how real it looked. Sam almost felt a little sick for a second as he finished stirring. It really did look like a pot of blood.

"Like I said, it's entirely edible," Aunt Emma said and Sam looked up at her. "You have to be careful with it outside in the daytime or it'll attract bees, it's so sweet. At night we won't have that problem, though. Any of us who aren't wearing masks could pretend to eat some soup." She cackled and rolled her eyes and everyone laughed.

The next afternoon, Aunt Emma picked up the whole committee after school. On the way to Slithern's costume shop they stopped at a grocery store to get five dozen small eggs, gelatin, grapes, creamed corn, half-and-half and the rest of the supplies they were going to need. They bought fifteen rolls of paper towels.

"I can't wait," Aunt Emma said, getting back into the car. She looked at Sam. "Your mother and I have been rehearsing on our lunch hours. We have our cackles down perfectly." She demon-

strated and Sam felt a delicious little chill go up his spine.

As they drove, Sam felt an increasing excitement. More than anything else about the haunted house, he admitted to himself, he was excited about the costumes. He was dying to put on the skeleton costume again.

"Here we are, fellow ghouls and creepies," Aunt Emma said as they rounded the last corner. Everyone cheered. They piled out of the car and raced each other to the door. Aunt Emma brought up the rear this time, laughing as Sam and Jason pretended to shove each other out of the way.

"Okay, settle down," Adelia said. "Or Mr. Slithern won't let us into the shop at all." Beth exhaled, a long, loud sigh. Sam and Jason stepped apart.

"She's right," Sam said. "We sound like a bunch of second-graders."

Aunt Emma laughed. "Not me. I sound like a third-grader, at least. The world's oldest third-grader in fact."

"Come on," Sam said. He was surprised at the strange urgency in his voice. All he wanted was to go inside and get the skeleton costume.

Aunt Emma led the way as they went through the door single file, and Sam blinked, stepping to one side. He squeezed his eyes shut, trying to make them adjust faster.

"Mr. Slithern?" Sam called out. There was no answer and Sam felt himself getting angry. What if Mr. Slithern wasn't here? What if he had forgotten about their agreement? Sam felt a sheen

of sweat rise on his forehead. It would mess everything up if they didn't get the costumes. It would just ruin *everything.*

"Mr. Slithern?" Beth yelled. Her voice was high and shrill and if Mr. Slithern was anywhere within a block, Sam thought, he would hear. But there was no answer.

Sam crossed the front part of the shop, dodging around the end of the last couple of racks. He grabbed the back room doorknob and turned it. It was locked again. Sam rattled the doorknob angrily, hoping Mr. Slithern was inside again, and would open the door like he had last time. But nothing happened.

Sam stepped back from the door. The shop was silent. No one was talking and no one was moving at all. They were all listening, waiting. Sam could hear the sound of his own breathing. Sam felt like kicking the clothes racks. How could Mr. Slithern do this to them? Sam clenched his fists.

Then, suddenly, Mr. Slithern seemed to appear from nowhere. It was though he had been sitting down on the floor somewhere between the clothes racks and had just now decided to stand up.

"I am almost ready," he said in a weird, rasping voice.

Sam felt his whole body jerk at the sound of Mr. Slithern's words. No one said anything for a few seconds and Sam knew that everyone else had been as startled as him. No one had known that Mr. Slithern was there at all.

"Your costumes are there," Mr. Slithern said

into the silence. He pointed with a long, pale finger. For the first time, Sam noticed a stack of garment bags piled on the little counter at the front of the shop. "One vampire, one skeleton, one mummy, one Grim Reaper and two witches," Mr. Slithern recited. "And, as I said, I am nearly ready."

"Ready?" Beth echoed him this time.

"Ready to go," Mr. Slithern replied impatiently, as though Beth was slow to catch on to what he was saying—and her slowness had irritated him. "I am almost ready to go to your haunted house."

"Oh, will you be coming later?" Aunt Emma said in her extra polite voice and Sam knew immediately that she had not taken kindly to being startled out of her shoes.

"I thought I would just come now. If you would be so kind as to drive me."

Sam glanced at Aunt Emma. They hadn't planned on this. In fact, it had never occurred to him at all. Sam was pretty sure that the whole committee was as surprised as he was.

"We still have quite a bit of work to do on the house itself," Aunt Emma said. "Before this evening, we have to finish up so much that having anyone there early would only be a distraction. I'm sorry, but we really must be able to concentrate on our work."

Mr. Slithern's expression was hard to see in the dim light, but Sam thought he looked angry. "Very well," he finally said. "I will be there the moment you open the front doors, though. You

must let me in first. Before anyone. I wish to hand out my cards to each person who comes."

Aunt Emma hesitated, then nodded. "You can hand out the cards to people in line in front of the house. That would be easiest, I think." Before Mr. Slithern could say anything, she went to the counter and gathered up the costumes, then turned, her arms full of garment bags, looking at Mr. Slithern. "We certainly appreciate your letting us use the costumes. We will be very careful with them."

Mr. Slithern drew in a breath and Sam was afraid he was about to tell them they couldn't use his costumes after all.

"So we'll just be going now," Sam blurted out, before Mr. Slithern could say anything at all.

"I apologize for our rushing off like this, but we'll see you later," Aunt Emma said, and they all headed quickly for the door.

Sam kept glancing at the garment bags Aunt Emma was carrying. Which one held the skeleton costume? He resisted an urge to try to stop her and slide the zippers back far enough to find out. He shook his head. What a goofy thought. They needed to get going. They did have a million things to do, and it was possible that Mr. Slithern would change his mind if they gave him long enough to get upset.

"So long," Jason sang out as they crossed the shop.

"Happy Halloween," Adelia said.

"Thanks again," Sam called over his shoulder.

Almost running, he led the way to the door and held it open. A few seconds later they were back on the sidewalk, blinking in the afternoon sunlight.

"Boy, is he weird," Jason said quietly and Adelia nodded. Sam nodded, too, but his mind was on the garment bags that Aunt Emma was laying flat in the trunk. He wanted to put his costume on the minute they got back. They all should, really, he thought. It would give them time to get used to them.

Sam knew there were a lot of details he should be going over before it got dark and it was time for the haunted house to begin. But he couldn't think about anything except the skeleton costume. Sam could hear his thoughts whispering, in some tiny, back corner of his mind, that there was something wrong with that. But the whisper was easy to ignore—so he did.

Sam was standing in front of a mirror in Aunt Emma's upstairs bathroom. Everything downstairs was ready and they had less than half an hour before the haunted house would open. There were already kids lined up outside. The whole committee had been peeking out the front window drapes at the steadily increasing line. Sam's mother and Aunt Emma had already done their makeup and gotten dressed in Aunt Emma's room up the hall. Sam had heard them go past, talking quietly on their way back downstairs. It was almost time. The rest of the committee was getting their costumes on, too.

Sam put on the stretchy skeleton suit, and the cape—and then he discovered something. The cape had a pocket. Inside it, Mr. Slithern had tucked one of his business cards. Sam stared at it. The lettering was odd—there was something glittery about the ink. Sam tried to turn the card over to look at the back, but the costume gloves

made him a little clumsy. The card flipped out of his fingers and landed in the sink. The white paper card instantly curled up, absorbing the droplets of water clinging to the porcelain from Sam's hand-washing a few minutes earlier.

Sam set the curled card on the counter. It steamed a little, rocking back and forth. The edges curled even tighter. Sam had never seen paper do that before. He flicked it lightly with one gloved finger. It wasn't steaming anymore. He blinked. He had to have imagined that part. It was probably just very cheap paper—too thin or something. Sam lifted the card and slid it into the cape pocket.

Sam looked in the mirror. The skull that had been painted on the stretchy mask was perfect. The eye sockets looked absolutely real, the ivory smoothness of the bone so convincing that Sam expected it to be cold and smooth when he lifted his hand to touch his own forehead.

"Wow," Sam said into the mirror. "This is the best costume I've ever seen." There was a knock on the door and he heard Beth's voice.

"Are you ready, Sam? Come out."

Sam opened the door. He and Beth stood silently, staring at each other. Her Grim Reaper costume was really scary. The mask was of a pale, wrinkled face and the hooded cape hid the edges of it completely. There was nothing about the person standing in front of him that would even remind Sam of Beth—much less allow him to recognize her.

"You look amazing," Beth said quietly. Sam caught his breath. Her mask had almost seemed to move its lips when she spoke. He blinked. That wasn't possible was it? "So do you," Sam told her. "In fact, that mask—"

"Come on down, you two!" This was Aunt Emma's voice.

"Coming!" Sam called, forcing himself to stop staring at Beth. He closed the bathroom door behind him. He hadn't seen the mask's lips moving. He was just excited—and these were such great costumes.

Aunt Emma and Sam's mother were peeking out the front windows as he and Beth came downstairs.

"I don't see Mr. Slithern out there yet," Sam's mother said, turning around.

Sam took in an astonished breath. His mother's witch costume was as convincing as Beth's Grim Reaper. She wasn't wearing a mask, but she and Aunt Emma had done each other's faces in theatrical makeup—they had made their noses longer and their cheekbones unnaturally high. Aunt Emma had her head tilted, her eyes going back and forth between Sam and Beth.

"We look pretty stunning," she said. "All of us. Sam? Have you seen Jason and Adelia yet?" Sam shook his head. She pointed down the hall toward the kitchen. "They're finishing up in there. You should go have a look so you won't jump out of your skin when you do see them. Or vice versa."

"She means jump out of your bones, of course,"

Sam's mother said, laughing. "You obviously have no skin left." She let her laugh slide up the scale until it was a witch's cackle. Sam felt a prickle of excitement shoot through him. No one had ever had a haunted house this good. No one. Beth touched his arm and he turned. She had raised her scythe in her hand and was gesturing up the hallway.

Jason the vampire was coming first. His face was pale, shadowed. Aunt Emma and Sam's mother had done a perfect makeup job. His skin actually looked *thin* and his eyes looked a hundred years old. Right behind him was Adelia the mummy. Her costume made her look heavier, bigger, and the bandaged mask that slipped over her head seemed not to have eye holes. "You both look really good," Beth said. There was a murmur of agreement all around the room.

"Adelia, can you see out of your mask well enough?" Sam asked.

She nodded. "It's weird, but I can see almost as well as usual. Some of the cloth is sheer, I guess."

"I think we should get into place," Sam's mother said. She adjusted her tall, peaked black hat and rustled her full black skirt.

"What about Mr. Slithern?" Aunt Emma asked.

"If he isn't here on time, we can't delay the opening too long," Sam said. His jaw popped as he spoke. It was annoying and he opened his mouth wide, then closed it tightly, trying to make it stop. "We are supposed to open the front doors in exactly . . ."

Sam tried to look at his watch, then realized that it was covered by the gloves. He stared down at the realistic painting of the little fan of bones on the back of his hand. For a second he had the oddest feeling that he had hurt himself badly, that he was looking at his own bones. It made him feel a little sick and he took a deep breath, fighting the feeling. He wanted tonight to be perfect. He wanted everything to be exactly the way they had planned it.

Aunt Emma pushed up her sleeve, revealing her watch. "It's four minutes of seven. So we should be making our last check of everything."

"Right," Sam said, looking up. "I'll lead people through in groups of ten to fifteen. Beth will be in the living room with the creepy sounds tape and the headless Ghoul family."

Everyone laughed. The dummies they had made by stuffing old clothes with pillows and rags had come out really well. It looked like a whole family of headless people: a father, a mother and three kids. The father was sitting in Aunt Emma's big chair. The mother and the kids were arranged on the couch; they were all sitting facing the TV, watching a video of *Frankenstein*. And back in the corner would be Beth the Grim Reaper. She would wait, absolutely still, until Sam got through telling the people about the headless family, then she would suddenly move and shriek. Nobody had a better shriek than Beth. Then Sam would lead the group across the hall to the blindfold room. He would let them feel

the stuff in the bowls, then lead them out again. Then his part would be almost over. He would start down the hall with the groups, signaling to Adelia.

"Adelia will take over and lead people to the kitchen. Mom will be in there, cooking the witch's dinner," Sam went on. His mother nodded.

"I'll offer people blue creamed corn, eyeballs, blood soup and all the rest. And I'll cackle and try to get them to talk to me a little."

Sam grinned and felt the strange clicking sensation in his jaw again. "Then I take them into the dining room where they can see all the creepy food set out on the table like the headless family is going to come and eat any second," Adelia said.

"Right. Then we'll have Jason the vampire in the den," Sam went on. Jason gave a little nod and raised his upper lip to show the fake, pointed canine teeth that he had found in the pocket of his cape. They had been in a sealed little plastic package along with a silk handkerchief which Jason had tucked into his shirt pocket. In the dim light, the teeth looked very real.

"I'm going to be reading by the fire, drinking my glass of blood," Jason said in a perfect vampire-from-Transylvania accent. Everyone laughed again. "When people come in I will offer them a toast to their health and long life, then give my speech. Then the lightning will crash and the light will go out and I'll lead the people through the thread-cobwebs in the back hall, then out the

door into the backyard. I'll show them the sidewalk that leads back to the street."

Aunt Emma nodded. "And when one group is about halfway through, Sam will signal me to let the next one in. We don't want the groups to overlap or run into each other, Sam, so be careful with the timing," she said. "Everything is ready. This is going to be fun. Let's get started. Mr. Slithern will just have to understand. We could have handed out his cards. Since he wants to do it this way, I don't think we have to feel responsible for his lateness."

"We told him what time we would start," Jason said.

"We did," Beth agreed. Her old, wrinkly, face mask almost seemed to carry the expression Sam knew was on her face: impatience.

"I'll go out front and entertain people for four or five more minutes," Aunt Emma said. "If he isn't here by then, we start without him."

Everyone nodded in agreement. "That's fair," Sam said. "We'll delay a little for him. But we can't just wait until he shows up."

"I'm off, then," Aunt Emma said, putting her hand on the doorknob. "Everyone have a great time. Remember everything we talked about. Keep an eye on any little kids or older people—we might get a few grandparents. Make sure everyone has fun and is safe."

"We will," Sam promised.

Aunt Emma went out the door. Sam could hear the murmur of voices rise as people standing in

line saw her. Even through the door, they could all hear her opening cackle. Sam peeked out the curtain and watched as Aunt Emma began pacing up and down on the porch, looking up at the sky from time to time. "We are waiting for a friend to arrive," she told the crowd, glancing up sharply. "Did any of you notice anything—unusual—on your way here?"

Sam smiled. Aunt Emma would turn their being late into part of the haunted house. Someone from the crowd answered and Aunt Emma pointed up at the sky. "You could all help me watch. If you see a broomstick soaring overhead, tell me, please. I am getting concerned over how late our friend is. She is doing the cooking tonight and we really can't begin without her." The crowd murmured and Sam saw most of them look up at the sky.

"She's great," Adelia said. "I'm going to go practice falling out of my closet. Sam, tell me before you open the door, okay?"

"I will," Sam promised. "You look great. No one will even know it's you."

"Or any of us," Beth said. "You were right, Sam. Our best friends won't know us. These costumes are incredible."

"I think I'll go get settled into my kitchen witch role," Sam's mother said.

He hugged her. "Thanks for doing this, Mom."

His mother squeezed him. "I'm going to have fun tonight. Sam? Have you lost weight? I noticed last night you didn't eat a lot of dinner.

And now you feel like skin-and-bones. Even when you're busy you have to remember to eat, you know."

Sam pulled away, too excited to listen to a lecture about eating from his mother. "I'll eat more or something," he mumbled and his mother released him.

"Have a good time, Sam," his mother said as she started down the hall. "Ham it up. People love it when you overplay a part like this. Be really creepy."

Sam nodded and saw Beth looking at him. Her posture was odd, her shoulders humped up. "You okay?" he asked her.

"Sure. It's just weird, that's all."

"What is?" Sam laughed. "I mean, which part?"

"This cape, the hood, carrying the scythe around. I feel . . . funny. Or something." She shook her head. She looked exactly like an old wrinkled man with a fierce expression and arching brows. Except for the scythe, of course. The scythe made her look like the Grim Reaper. Sam shivered.

"We're spooking ourselves."

Beth nodded, her old man's face and hair appearing, then receding into the hood again. "We sure are."

There was a knock on the door—three strikes on the brass lion's-head knocker. Beth hurried to her corner of the living room and Sam called to Adelia. He heard her relaying the message down the hall to his mother and Jason in the

back den. After a pause of a few seconds, Sam pulled the door open. Aunt Emma was taking red carnival tickets from the first group. They all looked up at the sudden opening of the door, startled.

7

"Good evening," Sam said in his best scary voice as he opened the door. The first few kids in line giggled, then leaned to one side or the other trying to see past him. "May I help you?" Sam inquired in a formal, old-horror-movie voice.

"They want to come in," Aunt Emma answered from her place a little to one side of the porch.

Sam bowed and opened the door, backing up. As the people came into the house, Aunt Emma winked at Sam, then closed the door.

"Thank you for coming to visit us on this Halloween night," Sam intoned, just the way they had practiced. The kids giggled again.

"Who are you?" a small boy asked. Sam recognized him. He was a friend of Jason's younger brother. A third-grader, Sam was pretty sure.

"I am a ghost, obviously," Sam said disdainfully. "You can hardly think otherwise when I walk around like this, with my bones bare and clanking." When he spoke, the weird clicking in

his jaw started again. As he told the kids that they were about to meet the family who lived in the house, he tried talking with his back teeth touching, but it was too hard. He was going to have to be talking all night. He hoped that the clicking would go away by itself soon.

"I mean *who* are you? What's your *name?*" the boy insisted.

"I must have had a name," Sam answered, pressing his skeleton hand against his forehead, pretending to be deep in thought. "I must have had a name when I was a boy like you are now. But I do not remember it."

That silenced the boy, and Sam was glad. He hadn't thought about anyone asking him that question. The way he had handled it wasn't bad, he thought. He should tell the others. He wished that they had talked about what to do if someone tried to make them break character by talking to them normally.

Sam gestured and walked through the entryway toward the double doors that led into the living room. They were open wide. Sam stopped just inside the doorway and let the people stream in around him, forming a rough semi-circle around him as they looked around.

"As you can see," Sam said. "The Ghouls are normal in most respects. They are an average family except for one or two little things which set them apart from the rest of us. For one thing, they have no heads. You may see this as a prob-

lem, but they do not. They are quite used to it, actually."

Sam pointed, as they had rehearsed, to the father dummy. "This is Mr. Ghoul . . ." he paused and made the kind of gesture that adults made when they were introducing someone. The boy who had asked the questions stepped forward and tried to shake the dummy's hand. At that instant, Beth, who had been almost unnoticeable in the dimmest back corner of the room, leapt forward, shrieking. Every single person in the group screamed or cried out, then they all began to giggle.

"I am here because the time is very near for the Ghoul family," Beth intoned. "It won't be long before they must come to be on the other side, from which there is no return. But for now, they remain here and welcome you to tour their house. It is, of course, haunted."

The group giggled nervously. Sam stared at Beth. She was doing an incredible job. *He* had jumped, and he had known that she was going to do exactly what she had done. He had been *expecting* Beth's sudden shriek and it hadn't helped a bit.

"Follow me, please," Sam said after a few seconds of shivery silence. Beth raised her scythe and pretended to gesture at the people behind him. Then she walked very stiffly back to her corner and stood close to the wall again, pretending to watch first one, then another of the four dummies that made up the Ghoul family.

No one moved. Before Sam could tell them again to follow him, Beth raised her scythe and slowly moved it back and forth.

"Right this way, if you please," Sam said, a little louder. He put his hand on the question-kid's shoulder and nudged him toward the hallway. "If you would kindly accompany me," Sam said, sweeping his cape across the floor by turning abruptly and letting it flare out. This seemed to get the group's attention and they followed him into the hallway.

"This is the Ghoul family's ancestral home," Sam began his speech. He had practiced it so many times that he wasn't even nervous. He led the group across the hallway and told them to close their eyes tightly while he slipped the blindfolds on them.

"Now you are going to reach into a bowl of eyeballs," he said, in his best serious eerie voice. The kids giggled and shifted back and forth, bumping shoulders and laughing when the first one shrieked after touching the peeled grapes. Sam set the grapes down and went down the line of kids again, this time letting them put their hands into the creamed corn.

"Eeeeeuuuwww," the question-kid howled. "It feels like, like—"

"It is frog eggs and pond slime," Sam explained reasonably. Everyone giggled again.

Sam brought out the third bowl. This one contained twisted strips cut from old T-shirts that had been soaked in runny gelatin. "Intestines,"

he announced and they all squealed and then laughed again.

Sam set each bowl back on the long table as he went, careful to keep everything placed exactly where he would need it for the next group. Then he had each one of the kids dip their hands in clear water and handed them paper hand towels. Quickly, he replaced everything, then flipped off the dim light and removed the blindfolds. Once he had them back in the hall, he kept up a steady stream of talk as he led them slowly along. "This old house," he said, thumping the wall, "was built many years ago by the Ghouls' great-grandfather."

The thump on the wall was Adelia's signal and she banged the closet door open and almost fell into the hall. The kids screeched and screamed as she pretended to struggle back to her feet. "And they keep me in a closet, mummified," she said in a fake, quavery voice.

Sam stopped as the kids focused on Adelia and her speech about how the house had been built mysteriously and how the family of witches who had been hired to cast spells of good luck on the place had moved in to stay once it was built. "Like company who wasn't really invited, but who stays forever," Adelia said. She was doing a great job, Sam thought to himself. And his part had gone pretty well, too. Next group, he wanted to go through the bowls a little faster. But everything else had gone perfectly.

Adelia finished her speech and told the group

to follow her into the kitchen. Sam stood for a few seconds, listening to his mother cackle and whisper. The kids were quiet, listening, then screamed and shrieked when she turned the pot so they could see the blood soup.

Sam turned and started back toward the front door. He wasn't quite sure how quickly to bring in the next group yet. They would just have to see how long it took for each set of people to make it all the way through the house. He peeked out the window and saw Aunt Emma gesturing widely, pacing and talking to the people in line. Some of them laughed. Everyone was watching her, entranced. She cackled and took her pointed hat off, holding it out to one side, then crammed it down on her head again. "The Ghouls are an old family," she said, cackling a little. "*Very* old. You'll see." Her voice got high and she nodded knowingly, stretching the words out. "You'll seeeeee . . ." She waggled a finger at the crowd and they laughed again.

Sam opened the front door a crack and Aunt Emma turned. They had rehearsed this. The hinges made a little squeal that she could hear. He put one finger just over the edge of the door where she could see it, then pulled it back. This was their signal. They had three. One finger meant bring up more people. Two fingers meant for her to delay and keep the crowd entertained. Three fingers meant an emergency of some kind.

Aunt Emma nodded when she saw the signal and then faced the crowd again. "Are you ready

to go inside?" she asked, gesturing at a man who had come with four kids in costumes. He nodded. "Are you sure?" Aunt Emma asked, shaking her head. "You never know what will happen in this house."

The man grinned. "Sure."

Aunt Emma pointed at another group of seven or eight kids standing at the front of the line. "And you? Are you ready?" Everyone nodded again.

"I will go in first," a rasping voice came out of the crowd.

Sam recognized the voice instantly. Scared to open the door any farther, he leaned to look out. Mr. Slithern was making his way up the sidewalk to the porch. Sam clenched his fist. He really didn't want Mr. Slithern to come in.

Sam watched as Aunt Emma waggled a finger at Mr. Slithern, drawing him aside, trying not to let him ruin all of the work she had done to get everyone in the right mood to go through the haunted house. Sam could see her talking to him and knew she was explaining that they wanted him to hand out his cards to the people in line *before* they went into the haunted house. Sam held his breath. Mr. Slithern would ruin everything if he insisted on coming in. Sam wished he could hear what they were saying. He watched, crossing his fingers.

An odd clicking sound made him look down at his own hand. He uncrossed his fingers, then crossed them again. The click was a little louder

this time. It had to be something in the stretchy glove that he was wearing.

Sam glanced up. Mr. Slithern was still talking to Aunt Emma. After a few seconds, Mr. Slithern looked toward the door. It seemed to Sam that Mr. Slithern looked straight into his eyes—like he knew Sam was hiding behind the door, peeking out at him. Sam narrowed the crack a fraction of an inch.

Aunt Emma was talking fast. Sam could see her pointing, leaning close so that the crowd wouldn't hear what they were saying. Mr. Slithern straightened and said something to Aunt Emma. He shook his head, gesturing emphatically toward the house. Suddenly, he started forward. He made his way past Aunt Emma and climbed the steps up onto the porch. Sam shrank back, expecting Mr. Slithern to open the front door, but he didn't.

Instead, he took up a position on the front porch and stood there silently. If he was aware of Sam, less than two feet away, he showed no sign of it. He was wearing his black cape, and he reached beneath it with his right hand. A second later, he pulled out a small box. Sam recognized it instantly. It was the box Mr. Slithern had shown him at the shop that held his business cards.

Aunt Emma came up the steps. She nodded briskly at Mr. Slithern, then leaned to whisper through the crack in the door, her face about six

inches from Sam's. "Are you ready for the next group?"

"Yes," he whispered back. "Is Mr. Slithern—?"

"I think he'll just stay on the porch," Aunt Emma breathed. "I hope so. I certainly don't want to argue with him in front of all these people. Let's just get to work, Sam."

"I'm ready for more people," Sam said, glancing past Aunt Emma to see Mr. Slithern peering in his direction. Aunt Emma straightened.

"The next few brave souls may come up onto the porch now. If you dare . . ." She made her witch-cackle and pointed at the first people in line. Sam stared through the crack in the door. Her fingers looked too long, too bony for a second. Then she lowered her hand and Sam saw the next group coming up the steps. A gray-haired man led the way; there were ten or twelve kids behind him, their eyes round and scared already. Aunt Emma took their tickets, then motioned them up the porch steps. Sam waited until they were close, then he swept the door open.

"The Ghoul family welcomes you to their home," Sam said in his best spooky voice. Mr. Slithern looked around at him. For a second, Sam thought he saw an odd expression on Mr. Slithern's face—a strange angry scowl. Then it was gone. It had probably been a trick of the dim light, Sam thought. Or maybe Mr. Slithern really was mad at them. Maybe he'd thought they had agreed to let him inside—to let him be a part of the haunted house.

"Please," Mr. Slithern said as the man went past. "Take one of these."

The man looked startled, then reached out and took the business card from Mr. Slithern. He read it, his face lighting up with understanding. "These costumes look great to me," the man said, gesturing from Mr. Slithern's cape to Aunt Emma's witch outfit. "Okay kids, let's get going."

The man slid Mr. Slithern's card into his pocket and Mr. Slithern smiled. He had a ghastly smile. It made his long pale face look even more like a wrinkled mask. "Here," he said, approaching the girl closest to him. He handed her a card, then gave one to each of the others. They all took the cards, but looked confused, like they didn't know what to do with them. "Put them in your pockets," Mr. Slithern said. "Be sure to keep them. It's very important." His face was so intense, his voice so raspy and strange, that Sam shivered.

Mr. Slithern went from one person to the next, making sure that they each had a card, and that they put it in their pockets. Sam watched him, feeling strangely scared. It was creepy the way Mr. Slithern looked directly into each person's eyes.

"Mr Slithern, we need to get going," Aunt Emma finally said in a loud whisper. Mr. Slithern stepped back and Sam beckoned to the group to come inside.

Beth saw that a lot of the kids were a little younger than the last group and toned down her shriek. They all still jumped and gasped, including the man who was with them. In the blindfold room, Sam made sure that each one had a turn with every bowl, going a little faster than he had with the first group. Once he turned them over to Adelia, he was really having fun. People were having a good time. It was a great haunted house.

The next group was eleven giggly fourth-grade girls. Beth lunged at them and they danced back, shrieking in voices high enough to shatter glass. Sam gave them an especially creepy session with the bowls and the blindfolds and they seemed to love it. When Adelia took over, Sam listened for

a moment as the girls giggled their way into the kitchen. He waited until he heard them shrieking over the festive meal of blue goo and blood soup in the dining room before he went back to the front door.

Sam opened the door a crack and peeked out. Mr. Slithern was still standing on the porch, motionless, looking out at the crowd. Aunt Emma was down on the lawn, working the crowd, making people laugh. Sam closed the door, then opened it again. This time, Aunt Emma heard the hinges groan. She urged the next group to come forward. There were twelve people in this one, and two of them were first-graders. Sam opened the door suddenly as they got close.

"Please, take these," Mr. Slithern said, just as Sam began his speech. Sam stopped and waited as Mr. Slithern gave a card to every kid in the group, even the two youngest.

Sam took a deep breath and started his speech over. Once the cards were handed out, Mr. Slithern seemed not to care if the people talked to him or if they even understood what he was handing them. The little kids certainly didn't, Sam thought. Not without someone explaining it to them, anyway.

In the living room, Sam introduced each group to the headless Ghoul family and Beth leapt forward, doing her part perfectly. Her voice seemed to get deeper and huskier as the groups went through. After Adelia took the group on down the hallway, Sam paused on his way back to the front

door. As he stopped his knees ached a little and he could hear them popping as he shifted his weight. He stretched, feeling stiff, and heard an odd ripple of pops from his spine. Sam felt his skin prickle. What was going on?

Sam shook his head, puzzled. He had had joints pop before, but never like this. He and Beth had spent a few hours on their hands and knees the day before, scrubbing Aunt Emma's floors. Maybe that had caused it—he just had sore muscles and was a little stiff.

"Sam?" It was Beth's voice, low and rough.

"You're really great," Sam told her. "Does the screaming make you hoarse?"

Beth stepped out of the shadows. "Sam? I have to tell you something."

"What?"

"Sam!" a voice came from the front door. It was Aunt Emma, calling softly. "Are you ready?"

"Run through the next group," Beth said. "Then come talk to me for a minute."

Sam nodded as Beth went back to her shadowy corner. Then he went to the front door and peered through the crack. Mr. Slithern was handing out his cards to every single member of the next group as well, including the little kids. Sam shook his head. A lot of those cards were going to wind up as trash on lawns and in the gutters up and down the street, he was sure. As people left through the side gate, they would probably just drop them.

Sam reached one finger around the edge of the

door and heard Aunt Emma instructing the next group. He pulled his finger back, leaning to see so he could time swooshing the door open correctly. Mr. Slithern stepped forward to admonish one of the kids for dropping his card on the ground. Sam waited. As soon as Mr. Slithern was out of the way, he pulled the door open, welcoming the newcomers to Ghoul House.

In the living room, Beth did her part, then Sam led the group through the blindfold room. He signaled Adelia and turned them over to her, while they were all still laughing nervously from her incredible entrance.

"What?" Sam asked Beth as he came into the living room on his way back.

She stepped forward and looked at him in the dim light. "Feel this." She held out the scythe. The plastic blade glistened in the light. It looked even more real than he remembered. "Touch the blade. Be careful."

Sam grinned, sure she was joking. He started to pull the skeleton glove off, but the cloth clung to his skin and he couldn't free it. "My hands must be sweaty or something," he told Beth. "I can't get the gloves off and we don't have time. Is it sharp?"

Beth nodded. "Really sharp, Sam. I cut myself on it. Not bad, but I bled a little. I thought it was plastic."

"It is," Sam said. "You probably just caught an uneven place with your hand or rubbed it just right and—"

"I did *not,*" Beth interrupted him. "It's metal, Sam. And it's really sharp. Make sure the little kids don't come close to me. I can't imagine why Mr. Slithern would give us a real scythe, but it isn't very responsible."

Sam shrugged. "It sure isn't. But he's weird, anyway. He's standing out on the porch handing out his cards like they were tickets to the haunted house or something. He gives them to kids who are way too young to think about renting costumes. And he tells them all to make sure they hang onto the cards. I bet they don't. We'll be picking them up for a week."

Beth gestured toward the front door. "We better keep going. Or people will get tired of standing in line."

Sam started toward the front door. The wrist bones painted on his sleeve seemed to twist as he turned the doorknob. He wished they could have gotten these great costumes without having to deal with Mr. Slithern.

As Sam opened the door, he saw Mr. Slithern, still standing at attention on the porch. This time Mr. Slithern looked up. Sam started to close the door, but Mr. Slithern was looking straight into his eyes. And he was smiling.

Aunt Emma turned and Sam gave her the signal for the next group. As they came through, Mr. Slithern reminded them one by one to keep the cards he was giving them. Aunt Emma arched her brows and shook her head a little. Then she turned back to the crowd that was lined

up across the front lawn and continued her witch act, telling them how much they would enjoy seeing the Ghoul Family House, joking a little with the people at the front of the line. Sam eased the door shut once the whole group was inside. He led them into the living room.

The next five or six groups came and went without anything special happening. Sam tried to keep people moving through the house at an even pace. Adelia's moaning got more and more eerie and strange with every group, Sam thought. Beth's shriek got louder, too. Sam was careful to keep people far enough away from her that the sharp scythe didn't come close to anyone when she swung it back and forth. When the night was over, Sam intended to say something to Mr. Slithern about the scythe. Maybe he didn't know how sharp it was.

The next group of people was especially large. "They're all related and they want to go through together," Aunt Emma whispered to him through the crack in the door. Sam counted. There were about seventeen of them—but no really young kids.

"It should be fine if they'll all stay together," he whispered back.

Aunt Emma nodded. Then she cackled. Not for the crowd, Sam realized, because it was too soft a sound. He stared as she shook her head, her eyes twinkling. "Two of the older girls are wearing witch costumes. Imagine. They think being a witch is some kind of joke."

Sam laughed with her. People could certainly be stupid, he thought. Then he blinked. What was he thinking? Of course dressing up like a witch was a joke. Aunt Emma was already turning around and he watched her gesture the people toward the front door. He swept it open, startling them with his sudden appearance. He reached down to pull his cape aside so they could see the skeleton ribs on his costume, but he caught his finger on something. Irritated, he tried to pull it free without looking but couldn't. People were staring at him, waiting for him to get started. He gestured with his free hand.

"Come in, come in," Sam said to the people. As they walked through the door and arranged themselves in a loose semi-circle around him, he began his speech. Once they were standing in the living room, looking at the headless dummies, he tried to free his finger again, pulling hard without bending to look down.

Beth made her shrieking sound, startling the people. Then, as she spoke, Sam eased off to one side and turned so that no one else could see. Only then did he bend over, trying to see what his glove was caught on. What he saw in the dim light made him gasp. His heart thudded against his ribs and he looked wildly at Beth, fighting to keep from screaming.

Sam stared down at his gloved hand. It looked like his index finger was hooked beneath one of the ribs. *Beneath. Under.* But of course that was impossible. Sam blinked, trying to make sense out of what his eyes were telling him. It looked like the long thin finger bones were crooked around one of his ribs. Sam straightened his finger—and immediately was able to pull it free. He imagined that he could hear bone clicking against bone.

Sam flexed and straightened his fingers, working his thumb in a circle. The painted bones moved as he did. They looked real. Too real? What was going on? Sam laced his fingers together and heard a quiet clicking as his knuckle joints slid past each other. He gulped and shook his head. He was getting way too imaginative about all this Halloween stuff. He was hearing things.

Abruptly, Sam realized that Beth was finished with her speech and that the people were looking

at him again, wondering what they should do next. Sam pulled in a shuddering breath. He needed to do his job and stop imagining impossible things. He looked at the people and cleared his throat.

"If you will follow me, please," Sam said to the group. His voice was shaking and sounded odd in his own ears. The group wouldn't notice, he was sure. But Beth might. As he began to recite his next speech he looked back at her, but her wrinkled mask gave no sign that she could tell something was wrong. In fact she remained completely in character, running her thumb along the flat side of the scythe, her posture unnaturally hunched forward like an old, old man's, as she backed into the shadows against the wall.

Sam took the group into the room with the bowls and led them through the same routine he had used all night long. His hands felt normal now, but it was unsettling for him to look down at them as he handled the bowls, setting them back on the table. The bones painted on the cloth seemed much too real. It seemed to Sam like he could see them moving, the knuckles working like hinges.

Trying hard to calm down, Sam took the group down the hall, signaling to Adelia. She came out of the closet so abruptly, and the crazed moaning sound she made sounded so real that Sam felt his own pulse rising. One of the younger girls in the group cried out and clutched at one of the older boys. He put his arm around her protectively.

As Adelia led them down the hall, Sam watched. Once they had turned into the kitchen, he tiptoed after them, peeking in the kitchen door.

His mother was stirring the blood soup, leaning forward to talk to the people as they stared at the bubbling pots, the creepy jars of rubber bugs, and the cobwebs that hung down from everything.

"Of course, you will want to taste a little of the frog's brains?" his mother asked in a cajoling voice. She came forward, her face angled and bony in the dim light. Sam stared at her. He was used to seeing his mother in costumes and makeup, but this was weird. She didn't look like herself at all.

A hand on Sam's shoulder made him jump. He whirled around to see Jason, his chin red with the fake blood, his phony teeth bared. "Why are you back here?" Jason breathed. His voice was a breathy whisper and he was using his cartoonish vampire accent.

"I was just watching for a second," Sam said defensively.

"I understand," Jason said, still disguising his voice in a whispery accent. "But perhaps it would be better if you kept your mind on your part of the work."

Sam took a step back, moving out from under Jason's hand. As he did so, Jason turned to face him, leaning close. "The blood is good. Your mother is a fine cook."

"Okay, okay," Sam said. "I've been getting

spooked enough without having you act like this, Jason. Cut it out."

Jason tilted his head, arching his eyebrows. His skin looked unhealthily pale made up the way it was. There were deep shadows beneath his eyes. "I do not understand. Cut what out? I do not have a knife."

Sam shook his head angrily. "Knock it off, Jason. Please." He really did feel strange and now Jason was acting like a jerk.

Jason tipped his head in the other direction, looking absolutely astonished. "I do not understand your words. Truly, I do not. I would gladly do what you ask, but what do you wish me to knock off?"

Sam spun around, furious, and walked back toward the living room. He would be very glad when the last group went through and the night was over. It had been fun to start with, but now he felt strange and awful. As he passed Adelia's closet he could hear her moaning to herself. What was she doing? Practicing? She was good enough to scare anybody already.

"Beth?" Sam said as he headed for the front door. There was no answer. He glanced into the living room. Beth was standing against the wall in the shadows, still as stone. The scythe was a dark curve above her head, the handle firmly in her hand. "Beth?" She still didn't answer. Sam started toward her, but he stopped when he heard loud voices outside.

First there was an angry man's voice. "We've

been waiting for nearly two hours. It's getting awfully late."

"I know it's been a while, dearie," Sam heard Aunt Emma answer. She cackled and her voice rose to a shrill pitch. "We're going as quickly as we can. If you wish to complain and ruin everyone's evening, perhaps it's best if you simply leave."

Sam flinched. He didn't want anyone upset. He wanted this haunted house to be great, incredible. He resolved to take the groups through a little faster. And he could bring slightly bigger groups, too.

There was a third voice and Sam recognized its rasping tones instantly. "Just make sure that you hang onto those cards. It's very, very important that you don't lose them."

Sam went to the door and peeked out, trying to catch Aunt Emma's eye. Leave it to Mr. Slithern to be reminding people not to lose his stupid business cards rather than helping Aunt Emma keep them entertained. The impatient man was standing at the top of the steps. Sam swept the door open. "Are you ready sir?" he asked. "Please come in." Sam looked past the man and the kids who were with him. After this group there were only six or eight people left in line. One more group. It was almost over. Sam looked back at the man and smiled under his mask. He heard the man gasp and wondered what it had looked like. Did his smile make the stretchy hood move a little?

Sam stood aside as the man urged eight or nine kids through the door ahead of him. They were older kids—probably sixth-graders. Good. At least none of this would be too scary for them. Not even Adelia's moaning. Sam took them into the living room. Beth's screech was still getting better with each group.

When Beth was done, Sam finished his speech and then took them into the blindfold room. He tried to go a little faster, conscious now of the last few people waiting in line. It was hard. The kids wanted to make jokes with each other and squeal and laugh and talk about what was in the bowls. Sam finally got them back into the hallway, signaling for Adelia. She made them all jump with her sudden appearance.

Sam turned immediately this time and went straight back to the front door. He signaled to Aunt Emma and she brought the last bunch of people up the porch steps. There were no adults this time, just a group of kids. Mr. Slithern gave them his cards and his lecture about how important it was not to lose them. Sam was getting incredibly tired of hearing it. It was so silly, anyway. As he guided the group through the door, he smiled at Aunt Emma, forgetting that she couldn't see it. "Last group," he whispered and watched her frown.

"I suppose it is. A pity, dearie." She cackled.

Sam stepped back from the door, feeling almost angry. It was good that everyone had enjoyed playing their parts so much. But it made sense

to break out of character sometimes. The haunted house was getting too creepy, even for him. If Aunt Emma had just winked or smiled or something, he would have felt better, he was sure of it. He thought about the way that Jason had acted, and shivered. It was very weird how much Jason and Adelia had gotten into their parts. And Beth, Sam told himself as he led the group on to the living room. She hadn't said a word to him in hours—not since she had told him about the scythe blade.

He barely made it through his first speech before Beth shrieked. It was so loud this time that Sam fought an impulse to cover his ears. As he watched in horror, Beth stepped forward, swinging the scythe in a wide arc. It hit the corner of a coffee table, splintering off a chunk of the wood. Beth seemed not to notice. She began her speech. The people shifted uneasily, and Sam saw one of the girls lean close to another, whispering.

Sam led them away from Beth the instant she was finished, glaring at her from behind his mask. They had gone through the whole night without doing any damage to Aunt Emma's house—and Beth had to get careless right at the end. If Beth could tell that he was upset with her, she gave no sign at all. She just went back into the shadows. Sam got the people into the blindfold room and told them to wait for him for a few seconds. He raced back into the living room. "Beth, that's the last of them. You can go upstairs and change or whatever you want now."

Without waiting for a reaction, Sam hurried back and led the group through the bowls of icky stuff. They giggled and laughed and one of the girls kept shrieking. This was the last group, he kept telling himself. In just a few minutes, he could get out of the skeleton costume and be normal again. He was looking forward to it. It had been a great haunted house and he was proud of it—but his imagination was working overtime.

Sam took the blindfolds off the people, let them wipe their hands on the last of the paper towels, and took them down the hall. Adelia leapt out, right on cue, her voice a rising wail of misery. The people all jumped, then laughed nervously as she gestured for them to follow her to the kitchen.

Sam let out a huge breath. Boy, was he glad that this night was over. He headed for the living room. Maybe Beth would want to use the upstairs bathroom this time. If she didn't mind waiting, though, he was sure ready to change back into his jeans.

As Sam walked, he kept expecting to see Beth standing near the front door talking to Aunt Emma, or at the foot of the stairs—but she wasn't in either of these places. Sam went to the front door and glanced out. The porch was empty. Aunt Emma was gone; so was Mr. Slithern. Sam looked around, puzzled. He glanced into the living room. Beth was standing in the middle of the room, swinging the scythe in a whistling circle.

"Beth! Beth?"

Instead of answering, she turned toward him. She raised the sythe blade high above her head and took one slow step toward him—then another.

"Beth. Stop it, it isn't funny," Sam said, louder than he had meant to. He didn't want the last group of people to hear him arguing with her. After all, they had paid for their tickets at the carnival office just like everyone else had. It wasn't fair to ruin the haunted house for them.

As Sam watched, angry and a little frightened, Beth kept coming, still spinning the scythe in a circle. Sam backed up, his heart beating harder. "Hey, I said knock it off." She kept coming. "Stop it, Beth!" Sam nearly yelled at her. "You're the one who told me how sharp that thing is."

Beth slowed the scythe, then let it swing to her side. "Where are we supposed to go now?" she asked. Her voice sounded odd, flat and lifeless, like a recording that was being played too slowly.

"You can go change upstairs if you want to," Sam told her. "Or if you wait about ten minutes, the last group will be out the back door and gone."

"We are supposed to go with them, I think," Beth said slowly.

Sam stared at her. "What are you talking about?"

She drew something out of the pocket of her costume. At first, as she held it out toward him, Sam had no idea what it was. He took a step closer to her, squinting to see better in the dim light. That was another thing he was looking forward to—real light. All the darkness was getting to him. He took another step, feeling wary. He kept glancing at the scythe. Beth was holding it loosely in her left hand now, the little white object in her right. Sam took one more step.

At that moment, he knew what it was that Beth was holding—and he could not have been more puzzled.

"See?" Beth demanded.

Sam nodded. He *could* see, now that he was close enough. "It's just one of Mr. Slithern's cards. Big deal, Beth. He's gone, finally, after spending the whole night handing those out to little kids and getting in Aunt Emma's way. Beth, listen. Do you want to go upstairs and change first, or shall—"

"We are not supposed to go upstairs now," Beth said.

"She is right," Adelia said from halfway down the hall. Sam turned and looked at her, startled. Her voice sounded strange, too. Sam glanced at Beth, then looked back at Adelia. "This isn't funny," Sam said loudly. He was getting so angry

at them that he almost didn't care if the last group of people was still with Jason. If they heard him, it was the girls' fault, not his. "Some joke," he added, "You're both acting like zombies on Halloween night. Very original."

"No one," Adelia said very slowly, "intends anything to be a joke."

Beth pulled back her hand, cradling the card as though it were very precious to her. "We ought to go find him, now."

"Yes," Adelia agreed. "We should."

Sam backed away as Adelia came closer. "Find who? Jason? What are you talking about?"

"Mr. Slithern," the girls said in unison. "It is time to find him."

They linked arms and started down the hallway. Unable to understand what was going on, Sam followed them. Adelia had left the closet door slightly ajar and as he passed, Sam's cape caught on the edge. He reached up to pull it free and his hand brushed across his chest. He heard the same eerie clicking he had imagined earlier and looked down.

This time, Sam did cry out. His fingers had gone right into his rib cage. He pulled them free and turned his hand over, staring at the slender bones that extended to form his fingers. Terror spreading from his thoughts to his body, Sam stopped, trembling, and stood in the hallway as the girls went on. Was it real, then? Real? How could it be?

Sam forced himself to touch his chest again.

His fingers slid into the spaces between his ribs and clicked against his spine. He touched his thigh and circled the big leg bone with his hand. Shaking, Sam looked up. At the end of the hall stood Mr. Slithern. He was beckoning to Sam.

"All right, all right," he said in his rasping voice. "You come on now. We have waited long enough."

Sam shook his head and took a step backward.

"Where is your card?" Mr. Slithern asked. "Have you lost it?"

Sam stepped back once more. He tried to pull at the glove that covered his hand, but couldn't feel the edge of the cloth—in fact he couldn't feel the cloth at all. Was this what was happening to Beth and Adelia, too? Were they *becoming* the costumes they were wearing? Sam stared at Mr. Slithern as the white-haired man took a step toward him.

"Are we to wait for you, Mr. Slithern?"

It was Jason's voice, coming from somewhere in the back of the house. Sam thought he felt a sheen of sweat start on his forehead, but when he swiped at it with his right hand he heard the hollow clicking of bone against bone. He took one more step backward, then whirled and ran out the front door.

Sam could hear Mr. Slithern and Jason calling for him to stop, but he refused to slow down or to look back. He sprinted down the sidewalk, dodging past kids in costumes who were on their way home from the carnival with bags of candy

from trick-or-treating on the way, or prizes from contests at the gym. After a few minutes, Sam realized that the shouts behind him had dimmed and he slowed a little, risking a look back down the sidewalk. There was only darkness.

Sam stopped and tried again to pull at the gloves, feeling frantically for the edge of the stretchy fabric. There was no edge. There was no *fabric.* He stood still, trembling, wishing he could just keep running. But he knew he couldn't. He didn't understand what had happened, and he didn't know how to make things right again. But Mr. Slithern did—he had to. Because somehow, it was him, and his costumes, that had caused everything. Sam was sure of it.

Gathering every shred of courage he could find, Sam turned around and started walking back toward Aunt Emma's house. When he got close, he hesitated again. Then he heard voices coming from the backyard. Silently, he made his way through the flower beds and the pine tree boughs in the side yard. He moved carefully, trying to avoid the sickening click of bones when his knees brushed together.

"They are to come this way, now," Mr. Slithern was saying as Sam got close. Sam positioned himself behind a bush, then leaned carefully around it, terrified at what he might see. He expected to see Jason and Beth and Adelia, and his mother and aunt—but he would never have guessed that the backyard was full of people. Sam looked at them, his eyes skipping from one

face to the next. It was everyone who had gone through the haunted house, he was pretty sure. He recognized a lot of the kids' costumes, and there were a number of adults scattered through the crowd he recognized, too.

Sam moved back into the refuge of the bushes. It was up to him to do something and he knew it. But what could he do? How could he make Mr. Slithern go away and leave them all alone forever?

Sam leaned forward again, just far enough to see. The people were all standing quietly. He recognized two tall, peaked black witch's hats—his mother and Aunt Emma. Was everyone under Mr. Slithern's control? Sam clenched his fists and felt an unnerving grind as his bones moved against each other. Sam loosened his hands. Why wasn't *he* acting like a zombie? Everyone else was. Maybe he had noticed sooner than anyone else that something was wrong. Or maybe he hadn't let Mr. Slithern stare into his eyes long enough . . .

"Come forward now," Mr. Slithern rasped loudly, interrupting Sam's thoughts.

As Sam watched, the people began to move toward Mr. Slithern. As they walked, they all held one hand a little in front of themselves, as if they were holding the hand of some invisible person who walked beside them.

Sam strained to see better. He slipped through the bushes, making his way closer. Mr. Slithern was still gesturing, walking backward in front of

the people. "That's right. Come right this way. Hold onto those cards. It's very important. More important than anything else."

Sam stared. Between the fingers of the boy closest to him, Sam could see little flashes of white paper. The cards? Mr. Slithern's business cards! More important than anything else? Sam took a deep breath and waited a moment longer, spotting Adelia, Beth and Jason in a little knot near the end of the procession. Then he launched himself forward, hearing the rattling of his bones as he burst from the bushes. As he ran, he pulled the water-wrinkled card out of his cape pocket and threw it as far as he could.

"Drop the cards," he screamed at the crowd. A few of them looked up at him. Most acted as though they couldn't see or hear him at all. Mr. Slithern shouted something at him, but he couldn't understand it over the sound of his own yelling.

Sam shoved his way through the crowd, grabbing people's hands and snatching the cards from them. "Drop them! Tear them up! Get rid of the cards!" he screamed in people's ears. He was shaking them, desperate to make them listen.

Out of the corner of his eye, Sam saw Mr. Slithern coming toward him and he ducked away, still slapping the cards out of people's hands when he could, circling the crowd until he came to his mother and Aunt Emma. He managed to get his mother's card away, but Aunt Emma held hers in a closed fist. Sam swiped at the back of her hand. She squealed and dropped the card, stop-

ping to glare angrily at Sam. Then her expression changed.

"Sam? Sammy? What's going on?" his mother asked.

"The cards. Get rid of all of Slithern's cards!" Sam yelled, then ran on, managing to keep ahead of Mr. Slithern by a split second. "Come here," Mr. Slithern bellowed.

"Drop the cards," Sam heard his mother shouting. Then Emma took up the cry, and several more voices joined in.

"Nooooo!" Mr. Slithern screamed. "They have to come with me. I promised I would bring them with me!"

Sam turned to see Mr. Slithern gesturing toward a huge crack in the ground. Sam blinked, fighting horror. There were steps at the bottom of the crack. Steps leading down into the earth.

"That's where all the nightmares live," Mr. Slithern chortled. "All of them. The worst and the best. And they have no fun at all without people to frighten. I promised to bring them new people—"

Beth was coming toward Sam. She held Mr. Slithern's card in one hand and her scythe in the other. She raised it, her mask-face ugly with anger. "Pick up the cards. Pick them up."

Sam saw his mother dart forward, wrestling the scythe away. He helped her and together they flung it to one side. Then they managed to free the card from Beth's grasp. Adelia, shouting, was working her way through the crowd, grabbing

people by their wrists, peeling their fingers from around the cards.

"Don't lose the cards," Mr. Slithern was almost crying. "Keep them. Please keep them." His voice was shaking and he seemed to be getting weaker and weaker. He stopped running and bent double, obviously out of breath.

Sam dove back into the crowd, snatching the cards away from people, tearing them in half. He kept glancing back at Mr. Slithern, but the old man was still standing in one place, not far from the edge of the crack in the ground.

"What are you doing, Sam?" Jason demanded as Sam ran past. For an answer, Sam rounded on him, catching his right wrist before he could pull away. Sam managed to free the card and tear it apart. Then he glanced back at Mr. Slithern.

"Nooooo!" Mr. Slithern was screaming. For a second, Sam could not make sense of what he was seeing. Mr. Slithern seemed to be shrinking. Then Sam realized that the old man was descending the steps, walking stiffly downward. There was an eerie glow from the crack in the ground now, a sickly greenish color.

"Noooo!" Mr. Slithern screamed again. "I don't want to go. I hate nightmares!"

As he shouted this, Mr. Slithern walked down three more steps. Sam could tell that he was reluctant, that somehow, he was walking almost against his will, as if something in the ground was pulling him closer.

"Sammy!" Sam turned to see his mother running toward him. All across the backyard, people were shaking their heads, blinking, coming back to their senses. Sam held still while his mother hugged him, then stepped back and looked over her shoulder in time to see the crack in the ground beginning to close. He could just see the top of Mr. Slithern's head as the ground began to shake and tremble, groaning as it healed itself. A murmur rose from the crowd, a soft, relieved cheer. Sam looked at his mother. She took his hand and squeezed it. "You saved us all, Sam."

"He certainly did," Aunt Emma said from behind him.

Beth and Adelia came up. They had both pulled off their masks and it was great to see their faces looking normal—flushed and scared. Sam pulled off his own hood and felt the fresh night air touch his skin. Jason rubbed one hand across his forehead. "Who was he? How did all of that happen?"

Sam shook his head. "I don't know. It had something to do with his cards, and with the costumes. I began to feel like I was—a skeleton." Everyone nodded and murmured. The crowd was breaking up. People were calling out goodnight to each other like nothing had happened. Sam stared, then noticed Aunt Emma watching his face.

"I don't think they remember anything except the haunted house," she said. "Listen to them."

Sam focused his attention on two girls talking about the witch in the kitchen, then two men

who were laughing over Jason drinking the fake blood. One boy had been amazed at the meal in the dining room. An older girl shuddered as she described the stuff in the blindfold room.

"I don't know why they don't remember, but I'm glad," Sam said, looking at Aunt Emma and his mother. They still had their makeup on, but their faces looked less angular and bony—and much more familiar.

"Nobody knows what happened except us," Beth said from behind him. Beside her, Jason and Adelia were nodding. "It sure feels good to be myself again," Beth added. "I just sort of stopped thinking." Beth shivered. Adelia put her arm around her.

"Well, Mr. Slithern is gone now," Aunt Emma said. "For good. Look!"

Sam stared at the ground where the crack had been. It was closed—so perfectly that it was impossible to see exactly where it had been. People leaving the yard were walking right across it, talking and laughing. The moon was rising and the October air was crisp and fresh.

"I want to get this costume off," Sam said. The stretch cloth had become unbearably itchy, and much too tight. He hooked the tip of his index finger under the top of the glove and slipped it off. He dropped it to the ground and stared at it.

It was shimmering, a fine, fog-like mist rising from it. A few seconds later, the glove had disappeared, leaving only a grayish dust, like ashes.

"I'm going to go change," Beth said in an un-

easy voice. She headed for the back door, almost running. Adelia was right behind her. Sam followed Jason and Aunt Emma up the steps. Sam's mother brought up the rear.

Sam went straight into the upstairs bathroom, feeling a little shaky, his hands trembling in his hurry to get Mr. Slithern's costume off. He heard Adelia and Beth shriek and squeal in the other room, and he knew that what was happening to him was happening to them as well.

Each part of the costume began to steam and smoke the instant Sam let it hit the floor. The smoke smelled terrible, like wet garbage. The mist hung in the air for a few minutes as Sam washed his hands and face, scrubbing at his skin to get rid of the weird, awful feeling of the skeleton costume.

The little drifts of gray ash were easy enough to clean up with a paper towel. Finally, Sam put on his own clothes. Feeling almost normal, he emerged into the hallway and clumped downstairs. Jason was already in the living room, sitting on the couch. His mother and Aunt Emma came in a moment later, then the girls. They all looked at each other in silence for a long time.

"No one will ever believe us," Jason said.

Sam nodded. It was true—no one would ever understand. But it had happened.

His mother was shaking her head. "It all just seems so—crazy."

"Get in the car," Aunt Emma said suddenly.

Barely talking, they filed out the front door and

crammed into Aunt Emma's Volvo. She drove slowly, and it took Sam a few minutes to realize she wasn't taking them home. At least not yet.

Aunt Emma turned onto the street where Mr. Slithern's costume shop had been. Sam stared out the window. There was nothing there now. Nothing at all. It was a vacant lot.

Aunt Emma pulled over and they got out. Sam walked to the edge of the sidewalk. A little breeze stirred and he saw fine gray ash swirling across the dirt. Then, as he watched, it thinned, and disappeared.

"I wish that he never comes back," Beth said quietly.

"Me, too," Sam echoed. Adelia and Beth both nodded.

Sam's mother let out a long, sighing breath. "It's beginning to seem impossible," she said aloud. "But we know it happened."

Aunt Emma shook her head, looking at them one by one. "Happy Halloween. Shall we go home now?"

"Yes," Jason said. Adelia and Beth chimed in. Sam led the way back to the car.

DARE TO BE SCARED . . .

Was Sam's creepy haunted house one place you're glad to get away from? Well, there's another strange house on the block. Check out this terrifying preview of *Lizard People*, in which our hero learns more about lizards than they teach you in science class—a lot more. It's the new Avon Camelot Spinetingler coming in November 1997.

Michael Roglitz looked carefully at the front door of the house. There did seem to be something strange about the house. The color was plain old brown, but it shimmered oddly in the sun. Some of the windows were round instead of square. But that didn't make it haunted—no way.

"If there aren't any ghosts, why are you afraid to go close that door?" asked Pete.

"Yeah, let's see you close it if you're so brave," taunted Dave.

"I thought we were playing football," said Michael.

"Chicken?" asked Pete. "I dare you."

"No way. I just don't want to break the law."

"How are you breaking the law?" asked Pete. "You're just closing the door. I double-dog dare you, lizard face."

"I don't take double-dog dares," said Michael. He had learned long ago that dares were stupid—especially double-dog ones. If someone was daring you to do something, they were too scared to do it themselves.

Or too smart.

"You're just a chicken," said Dave. "That's all. A scaredy cat. Meow, meow." He took the football and started walking down the street. Pete began following him.

Michael knew he should just laugh at them. But something inside wouldn't let him. He was very angry with Dave.

"I'm not scared," Michael shouted without thinking. "I'll show you—I'll do more than close the door. I'll go inside."

Neither of his friends turned around. Michael was really angry now. He hated being made fun of. He would show them.

But as he took a step toward the front door, it opened another six or seven inches.

He told himself it was the wind. It *had* to be the wind.

Even so, he gulped a little as he walked toward it. And when it swung wide open, he nearly fainted.

But there was no turning back now. No way.

If he chickened out, his friends would make fun of him forever.

"I'm not afraid of ghosts," said Michael. "Or the stupid wind."

He took a step onto the cement stoop. He was just about holding his breath.

"It's a brand-new house," Michael told himself. "I can smell the fresh paint. No way it can be haunted."

Michael could see from the corner of his eye that his friends were pretending to ignore him. That made him even madder.

Suddenly, he had an idea. The only way to close the door now was to take a step inside the front hallway. And if he was going to do that, he might just as well go into the house. And if he did that, he could go to the window on the side of the house, open it, and yell at his friends.

But not just yell. He would get them back for teasing him. He would tell them that a ghost had grabbed his legs. That would scare them good. Then *he* would be the one who made fun of *them* forever.

As long as there really wasn't a ghost inside.

Michael looked at the door carefully, then glanced around the yard. The leaves in the trees rustled.

"See," he said to himself. "It was the wind." That was the only explanation. The dumb wind. Nothing to be scared of.

Boldly, Michael took a step inside the house.

He listened for a second. When he heard nothing, he took another step, then another.

He had just started to smile when the door crashed shut.

Even as he screamed, he felt the house moving around him.

Michael fell to his knees, knocked off-balance. Everything was spinning. He felt like he was on an amusement-park ride. The house pitched around him, turning like a toy top.

"I have to get out of here," he told himself. Michael threw himself back toward the door. But the knob was locked solid. Superman couldn't have budged it.

Michael banged with all his might, yelling to his friends outside to get him out. But there was no answer.

The first idea that came into his head was that the Earth had been hit by a giant asteroid and knocked off its orbit. Then he had another idea. He remembered the scene in *The Wizard of Oz* when Dorothy's house is taken to Oz by a tornado. The house was lifted up and spun around—exactly what seemed to be happening to him.

"That's just a movie," he told himself. Still, he was scared to go to the window to look outside. About the last thing he wanted to see right now was an old woman on a bicycle turning into a witch on a broomstick.

"I don't believe in ghosts or witches," he insisted to himself. Taking the first off-balance step

toward the window, he shouted out loud: "I don't believe in ghosts or witches!"

The house didn't seem to care. It just kept whipping around. Michael slipped and hit the floor as he headed to the large front window. Groaning, he put his hands up on the window ledge and pulled himself up to look outside.

The world beyond the window wasn't spinning. It wasn't clouding up or whirling in a windstorm, either. In fact, there wasn't a world there at all—just strange colors broken into odd patterns. It was like looking through a kaleidoscope. Triangles of silver and red and green mixed into swirling circles of gold, then flashed into purple and black lines that flared into outrageous orange pinwheels. White speckles appeared, burning holes into the collage of colors.

Then everything went pitch black. In the next second, Michael felt an electric charge surge through his body. He was tossed from the window like a rag doll. The last thing he thought before the back of his head hit the floor was this: "That's what I get for taking a double-dog dare."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Novelist M.T. COFFIN, whose "Spinetinglers" novels have sold more than one million copies, began his career writing obituaries as a free-lancer for his local newspaper, *The Nightly Caller.* This was in addition to his full-time job in the Dead Letter Department of the post office. While he thoroughly enjoyed writing about the dead, M.T. Coffin abandoned that work to begin his first novel when a series of nightmares so amused and delighted him that he felt he must write them down to share with his friends and family. He wrote thirteen "Spinetinglers" before his wife, Berry A. Coffin, convinced him that the stories were interesting and exciting enough to share with others and helped him to submit his manuscripts to Avon Books for possible publication. The books were accepted immediately and the "Spinetinglers" series was born when the first novel, *The Substitute Creature,* was published in March 1995.

Gwen Montgomery, of the Young Readers Department at Avon Books, is delighted to be publishing M.T. Coffin and says, "My spine tingled

on the very first page and I knew right then that M.T. Coffin's books would keep readers dying for more."

M.T. Coffin was born on October 31 in Death Valley, California. The year is uncertain since, for some mysterious reason, all records of his birth except the date have disappeared, and no records of any family members have ever been discovered. Raised as an orphan, M.T. Coffin attended Death Valley High School. After graduation, he attended DeKay University where he studied literature. It was there that he was introduced to the works of authors who were to be among his lifelong favorites, including Bram Stoker, Mary Shelley, H.G. Wells, Jules Verne, Mark Twain, and Edgar Allan Poe. It was also there that he met Berry during a blood drive on campus. Berry received a Bachelor of Arts degree in elementary education from DeKay and today is a substitute teacher and bee keeper.

Now, M.T. Coffin is writing full-time and has just completed *Lizard People.* Works in progress include *Circus F.R.E.A.K.S., My Dentist is a Vampire,* and *Saber-Toothed Tiger.* He is currently traveling to research upcoming novels and has most recently visited Transylvania in Romania and Murderers Creek, Oregon. Other "Spinetinglers" by M.T. Coffin include *Billy Baker's Dog Won't Stay Buried, My Teacher's a Bug, Where Have all the Parents Gone?, Check It Out—and Die!, Simon Says, "Croak!,"* and *Snow Day.*

M.T. Coffin lives in Tombstone, Arizona, with

Berry and their two children, Phillip A. Coffin and Carrie A. Coffin, and their dog, Bones. He enjoys many hobbies, including reading, collecting books, taxidermy, playing the pipe organ, and bug collecting, an activity the entire family enjoys. The Coffins split their time between Arizona and their summer vacation home in Slaughter Beach, Delaware.

When asked about "Spinetinglers" and his many readers, M.T. Coffin responds, "I get goosebumps every time I think about how exciting it is to be able to tell stories all the time, and to reach so many people. I plan to keep writing forever."

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